Weird Tales

MAR.

A MAGAZINE OF BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL STORIES

Paul Ernst
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THE ALBINO DEATHS

weird tortures in a ghastly abode of horrors – by RONAL KAYSER

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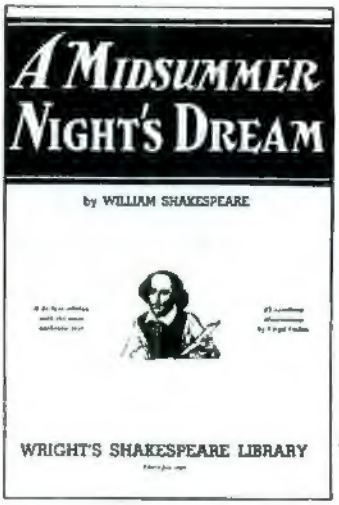

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Albino Deaths

By RONAL KAYSER

A grim, weird story of torture on the Wheel of Death, and strange albino mice and snakes in the torture cells of a castle under the iron rule of a Dictator

THE first day I said to the waiter: "*Garçon,* who is the lady?"

He replied: "I don't know her name. She comes here often, she minds her own business, she likes to be let alone."

"Always alone?"

"Always."

The second day I tipped the waiter. "Ask the lady if she will not share her table with a gentleman who admires her beauty."

He returned. "She says she prefers to be admired at a distance."

Her order was always the same: a glass and a bottle of the native wine. This she drank slowly, scarcely lifting her eyes from the red-checkered table-cloth. In the afternoon, the café was deserted except for a few sailors tippling at the bar in front. Surrounded by ugly red drapes which festooned the back-room walls, the lady was watched only by myself and the large circular eye of a spotlight veiled with a cataract of crimson mica. I couldn't imagine what attraction this miserable pot-house held for her. She was obviously not a *fille de joie,* in spite of her heavy rings, sultry rouge, enameled nails, and black metal-cloth gown that revealed her breasts. As for the wine, that sour fluid even the peasants despised; besides, she generally left half the bottle. Why did she come?

I consumed four or five whiskies daily while I sat watching this mysterious creature. I longed to meet her. It was not her physical charms, though she was handsome enough; rather than her firm body it was an atmosphere which she exhaled that suggested a ferment of strange intrigue. Not very often, she raised her large, bronze-green eyes. They were the eyes of a woman who has been steeped in dark plots, who has lived outside the law, and who exudes with her breath the warmth of a thousand illicit kisses. They were eyes which had looked on forbidden things.

Such women are dangerous. Those full, scarlet lips could surely have revealed secrets . . . secrets I wanted very much to know. I would have liked to follow her home.

But at four o'clock I had to return to the hotel.

I walked out into the streets. Sunshine, always scalding white, flooded the dusty, cobbled *piazza* and winked on the rifles of the soldiers who tramped around and around the bitter fountain. Sunlight scorched the flat roofs of the buildings and the blue surface of the sea and the warships anchored inside the headland. Perched on the dark cliff, the white dome of the castle resembled a bleached skull. It was a very old castle, and had been inhabited by generations of bloodthirsty nobles; now an equally bloodthirsty Dictator lived there. Inland, the volcano continually smoked a dun cloud into the sky.

The town was very quiet; quiet like the sleeping volcano, it seemed to me, burn-

"The wheel fell, and he went down with it."

ing with hidden violence and cruelty. I sensed medieval savagery in the air. Maybe it was the olive-trees, twisted and maimed like cripples, clawing for life in the rocky soil. Maybe it was virago-faced old women who wore amulets on their withered arms and who crossed themselves against the Evil Eye if you aimed a camera at them.

But mostly it was the rumors that ran like wildfire from lip to lip: whispers about vendettas, secret societies, warnings chalked on walls, men stabbed to death in the alleys, and other men just disappearing; men going out for walks and never returning to their families — generally men the Dictator didn't like.

PROMPTLY at four-fifteen the Count strode into the first-floor parlor of the hotel. He wore a white uniform, and had a saber cut on his cheek. He was the "spokesman" for the Government, and therefore very polite. He bowed, clicking his heels, as he handed us statements typed on pale, onionskin paper. The statements were written in bad French, and there was never any news in them.

We all shouted a question:

"What about the political prisoners?"

The Count never answered this question. He still smiled, but something like a veil came down over his eyes and his smiling lips. The whole country was like that. You could never really get next to it.

All we could do was rush to the telephones, call our Paris offices, and read the statements over the wires.

"The Dictator says——"

Our Paris editors cursed us at the rate of twenty francs a minute. Were we reporters, or parrots? Couldn't we dig out the real news? Today my editor was especially bitter. Did I know that the *Planet* had scooped me on a story? Didn't I know there had been a mutiny on one of the warships?

I answered: "Do you want me to put on skirts? The *Planet* reporter is a girl. She is a blond, and she dances with the naval officers. I suppose some dumb lieutenant told her about the mutiny to show her what a big hero he was in putting it down. Do you expect me to flirt with naval officers?" I hung up the receiver.

The next day I met this girl reporter in the hotel lobby. Her name was Beatica Field, but we all called her "Betty", and she called us "Bill" or "Jacques" or "Happy", as the case might be.

She grinned at me. "Want to come swimming, Bill?"

She had on a rubber cape that parted in front and showed her tanned legs and the curve of her bosom against the tight scarlet swim-suit. Her hair was yellow and very curly; her eyes were blue, and very innocent. You wouldn't think she could have scooped an old-timer like myself.

"No, thanks," I said.

"It would do you good to soak some of the alcohol out of your hide, Bill."

She walked out the door and got into what passed for a taxicab in this town. Her legs showed when she stepped up into the cab. I noticed the cabby looking around and grinning. He had a nasty-looking mug.

It made me sore. I thought the *Planet* was up to pretty small business, letting a kid like that risk herself in such a joint as this. I even had a notion to get up in the cab with her, just to be on the safe side. . . . But what could happen in broad daylight, with a soldier on every corner, too?

Besides, I had other business. I walked down the street behind the cab, and across the *piazza* into the café.

THE lady in the black gown was already at her accustomed table. I sat down boldly facing her, across the room, and ordered my whisky. The waiter looked down through thinned, hostile eyes:

"The lady asks if you will not sit with her today."

I stared. But the woman sat gazing straight at her wine-glass. It was impossible to guess what thoughts went on behind her handsome, rouged face. Walking over to her table, I bent and kissed the lady's hand. A hot smell of musky perfume clung to her sleeve.

"You are very kind," I said.

The waiter brought the whisky. "You will put the lady's wine on my check, also," I told him.

She smiled. "You too are very kind."

"No, I am just lonesome." This was meant for the waiter's ears.

When the man had gone away, I pulled my chair close to the lady's and said rapidly and softly, "My name is Bill Kyle, and my address—the Hotel Continental. I am a reporter. I send news to an American paper—when there is news to send. Sometimes I pay for informa-

tion, and I spend good American dollars."

The lady took a handkerchief from her sleeve, wet it with the tip of her tongue, and began to polish her blood-bright nails. "You can call me Madame Charlotte."

"I have heard that name somewhere," I said. But I could not remember where. Perhaps it was one of those names that rumor passed from lip to lip. Puzzled, I looked into her eyes. Glints of fire swam in their clouded, green depths. I looked at her white throat, her full round bosom, and at her hands.

Then I saw on the handkerchief a sign. It was a little red circle traced in finger-polish. Then I knew. The Red Circle. It was one of those secret, royalist societies which the Dictator claimed to have stamped out.

My pulse jumped. I felt that at last I had got hold of something. I said, "You can tell me about the political prisoners?"

The lady rubbed her handkerchief against her wine-glass and wiped out the telltale sign. A shadow frowned on her face. Her lips did not move.

"You would be doing your friends a great service," I urged. "You want world opinion on your side, don't you? Then you must tell the foreign press your side of the story."

"I could tell you much, but you would not believe." She sipped a little of the wine, looking at me over the glass. "You must see with your own eyes. Can you hire a boat for tonight?"

Afterward, I walked down to the sea and found a fisherman sitting on the bow of his boat mending a net. I told him what I wanted.

He was very much afraid. I took twenty-five dollars from my pocket. "This is for the boat." I added another fifty dollars. "This is for silence." His eyes jerked away from me and wandered up and down the beach. It was easy to guess that he was thinking about the Dictator, the secret spies, and the many men who had disappeared. At last his wet, tarry hand closed on the bills.

"Sometimes I forget and leave the oars in the boat," he muttered.

As I trudged up the beach, my glance fell on a patch of blue in the hot sand. I picked it up. It was Betty Field's cape. My watch announced five o'clock, so I decided she must have swum down to the wharves and then hurried to the press conference. I folded the cape over my arm.

In the hotel bar, I found "Happy" Thislow of the Associated Press. "I 'phoned the statement in to your office for you," he said. "I explained you had been in an automobile accident. Your chief said to put you in a cold bath and give you lots of black coffee."

He stared at the cape. "Where's Betty? I 'phoned her office, too. I thought she was with you."

"She must have paddled out to the fleet to see some of her boy friends," I said. "Maybe she will dig up another mutiny and scoop us again."

Then I ordered a quart of whisky sent up to my room. In the room I sat smoking cigarettes and waited for darkness to cover the town. The night fell like a black shadow lengthening from the headland where the Dictator's castle stood. It got very dark, and when they put out the street lights at ten o'clock there was only the pink spark of the volcano shining in the night.

I tore the brown drapes from the window and wadded these into my pockets. Uncorking the whisky, I spilled a half of that over my coat, and pocketed the bottle also. In case the sentries halted me, it would be well to be taken for a harmless

drunk. The revolver went into the waistband of my trousers.

It was a seven-foot drop from the window into the courtyard. The courtyard wall was high, but had strong vines to climb by. I ducked into an alley. It was unholy dark. The furry bodies of bats circled around my head and shoulders. Invisible rats squealed underfoot. The air stank. It was good to get down to the beach and feel the cool sea wind against my face.

There was no sign of anyone among the nets where Madame Charlotte had promised to be. I went knocking and tripping among them, falling over the ropes and swearing softly. Then a figure rose up from one of the boats. I knew that she had been watching to discover whether I came alone. Perhaps she thought I had sold out to the Dictator's secret police.

The fisherman had "forgotten" his oars. I pulled the curtains from my pocket. We wet them in the sea and wound the soaking cloth around the oars and oarlocks in order not to be betrayed by any creak.

It was a long row down the bay, hard, silent work. We kept our mouths shut, knowing how even a whisper would carry over the dark water. Twice we got badly scared. A party of sailors in a motor launch chugged by, not two hundred yards away. Luckily, they were coming offshore and were hilariously drunk; luckily, because if they had seen us they would have shot first and asked questions afterward. Then a searchlight on one of the destroyers stabbed at us. It looked like a blue crayon pointing over the black slate of the harbor. When it came close we lay flat in the boat and hoped we could not be seen against the midnight hulk of the cliff. The cliff was old and wrinkled, and it gave off a feeling of evil. The waves slopping against it made a sound like blood gurgling in the throats of dying men.

Madame Charlotte's hand flagged out, white. I backed water on one hand and pulled hard on the other oar. The boat nosed around, and it looked as if we were going to break on the cliff. We slid in between two wrinkles in the rock, and I shipped the oars in a hurry.

We went in—straight into a hole in the cliff. Inky blackness swallowed us. I couldn't see a thing. What I felt was millions of tons of rock pressing in at the sides and down over our heads. Even the air was thick and somehow hard, and I seemed to breathe it in lumps. The boat slid along with oily, gulping motions. It was like gliding into the throat of a dragon.

Then we were in the dragon's stomach. Madame Charlotte switched on her flashlight. I saw the oily, greenish surface of a pool maybe fifty feet in diameter, washing up against gray, ribbed walls that were plastered with a sickly moss looking like hanging shreds of membrane; not healthy membrane, but diseased, mucus-coated. The stuff sagged in bloated folds from the ceiling. The flashlight's beam crept along the wall and stopped at an iron pin projecting over the water.

"There," said Madame Charlotte. I dipped the oars.

"Tie the boat." I knotted the painter to the pin as Madame Charlotte, gathering up her skirts, stepped onto the ledge. I followed. As I did so, my hand touched a blob of the membranous moss. A shudder darted up my arm. The stuff was spongy, elastic and blood-warm. And it was slippery, like living viscera.

A sense of horror crawled through me.

"Come on," Madame Charlotte was saying.

The ledge slanted upward. It widened and became a floor. The flash-ray wav-

ered around, and showed a huge subterranean tunnel of gray, volcanic stone at the end of which jumbled blocks of black basalt formed an eccentric stair. Queer, nameless moths flapped under the groined roof. Lizards and salamanders slithered into great cracks in the floor. Along the shelving walls ran hairless mice. They were albinos, and I knew that they must have been breeding for thousands of mouse generations away from the sunlight. They had evidently shed their hair on account of the heat—heat that brought sweat to my face.

"You know where we are?" Madame Charlotte asked.

"Somewhere under the headland."

"We are three hundred feet below the castle. The dungeons are directly over our heads. You will see the political prisoners—and other things which it is not good to see. . . ." She laughed harshly.

The flashlight played up the basalt stair.

"God!" I cried, and sprang back. Fear, like a hot flame, dried my throat. My hand clawed for the revolver—leveled it.

Flowing down the black steps was an enormous snake. An albino like the mice, its skin showed mottled patches of faint pink. The pale, scabrous head lifted and reared back. The body, as thick as a man's thigh and twenty feet long, undulated over the blocks of rock and formed in coils. Venom slavered from the fangs, juiced milkily over the wattled throat.

"No, don't shoot."

Madame Charlotte pushed my arm down. She approached the serpent, playing the torchlight full into its red-rimmed eyes. A crooning whistle puckered her lips.

The snake answered with a shrill, windy hiss.

A terrible contest of magnetisms ensued. In the reflected light I saw the lady's face drain bloodless around the painted O of her lips. Her eyes glared green. The snake twitched. The red, forked tongue shivered and spilled venom.

Suddenly it sprang. The thing happened quickly—far faster than I could think to raise the revolver. The fanged head fell short of its mark, and dropped insensible upon the stones. The body stretched numb at our feet.

MADAME CHARLOTTE sprang up the steps. I wasted no time in following her. At the top of this stair, what appeared to be a wall of solid rock barred our way. Madame Charlotte seized one of the nodules of stone which hobnailed the wall. Immediately a square boulder slid back, and a wavering tongue of light played red on our faces. We passed into a second chamber, long, low, and pillared with gray columns of volcanic slag. The strange red light paled, and then waxed bright with a sinister blush.

I took care to mark with my eye the stone knob which Madame Charlotte touched to reclose the wall.

She turned to me. The red rays pierced her garments and traced the swelling curves of her form. Her full bosom rose.

"We're on the lower level of the dungeon," she breathed. "There is a guard—bribed. I will go ahead and explain about you."

Her eyes gleamed, cat-like.

"Will you give me the gun? In case the guard has been changed."

She glided away. I was alone. I lighted a cigarette, which I badly needed. With the aroma of the tobacco, I drew into my lungs another odor, biting sharp, sulfurous.

Two or three minutes passed.

Then I saw *it*.

The Shape shuffled soundlessly from

behind one of the pillars; its shadow blotted out the red, shifty light.

I knew what it was. Certain pictures in old, lore-filled volumes—certain grim race memories—told me. Terror scalded my wits. For a moment I was not a modern man. I was a medieval poltroon quivering under the lash of a centuries-past fear. My muscles hung flabby on their shaking bones. I could only stare. . . .

A peaked hood covered its head and neck, down to the red, sepulchral robe that fell from the wide, lank shoulders. A crimson cord girdled the waist and supported a ring of large, rusted keys. They were such keys—each a foot long, as belong in times five hundred years gone.

Lurid eyes blazing through the slitted hood stabbed warning. I snapped out of my trance.

I got my fists up. A little practise in boxing had taught me to watch a foe's feet. I watched these feet—laced in leather gamashes, queerly shuffling below the stiff folds of the robe.

The torturer—yes, I knew him for that—came close. . . . The hand that dangled at the end of the loose black sleeve was putty-colored, like dead flesh. It swung, and struck. The blow fell ludicrously short.

No! Not short! Not a blow—a noose!

God! A strangling wire around my throat!

I fought. I rushed, charged. But the fiend knew his art. My punches never got to him. I clawed at the wire. Too late! It bit deep in the flesh, it constricted and crushed the cartilage.

My own blood in my windpipe. . . . And darkness. . . . I was against the wall. My last thought—escape. I clawed at the stone knob. . . .

I felt his knees in my back. He dragged me down. Something like a photoflash bulb popped in my skull—blinding light—midnight black.

LIFE came back like a thief trying the doors of a locked house. Distant sounds banged, knocked. Lights probed at curtained windows.

Then I knew that I had a body, that the curtained windows were my own eyes. There was raw heat that stabbed in my throat, that seared my lungs. I coughed and strangled on it. I felt brimstone pouring into my mouth and nostrils.

I propped up my lids, was glad to squeeze them shut again.

Wetness slapped across my face. I squinted and saw—a circle of gold? No, yellow. . . . I groaned and wriggled and found my arms and legs somehow locked.

The wetness hit me again. My head cleared. The yellow circle swam into perspective, became a fluff of yellow hair.

"Betty!"

It was the girl reporter, all right. And the wetness was her swim-suit with which she was wiping my face. A loose, silken *sac de nuit* clothed her body in transparent wispiness that revealed the nubile lines of her thighs, waist, breasts.

And now, with a horrible shock, I got the meaning of those distant sounds and knockings. They were the clankings of the gyves that linked her wrists in ancient bracelets of iron. More—worse—an iron collar bound her throat and united to a stout chain moored on the rock wall.

And the same kind of gyves and collar had been affixed to me.

I stared around. We were prisoned in a narrow cell that had been hewn out of the stone, and that was doored with a latticework of wrought iron bars. A certain gracefulness in the shaping of these bars showed the hand of an ancient artist. Yet there was no beauty; rather, horror—displayed in the wicked, leering

features of gargoyles, monsters, and devils that grinned in the construction.

Through these bars fell a flaming red light, stifling hot, making the stone floor almost searing to the touch.

Outside, the red glowed lurid on a flagged, basalt pavement. The pavement chopped off short at the brink of a pool; a thick, viscid, greenish pool that bubbled and heaved and steamed a virescent vapor which clouded the whole chamber. The noxious fumes curled into our cell. They explained the raw fire I tasted.

I seemed to see in this pool certain oblique, animalish stirrings. . . .

I looked back at Betty. "How on earth did you come——?"

A pitiful shadow of wonderment clouded her face. "Bill, I don't know. . . . I was swimming. A boat came by. An oar must have struck my head. I came to, here—and——"

A shudder rippled her slender body.

"Betty," I groaned, "what have they done to you?"

"Nothing, yet. Just threats. That man—the one that brought you—keeps asking me one question. He wants to know which one of the officers told me about the mutiny. And of course I can't tell him."

"Sure," I said. "No reporter ever yet 'sold out' on an informant. It's the honor of the game, you see."

"But, Bill—the threats! You ought to see what I've seen. . . . The rack, thumbscrew, boot, they're all here."

I tried to grin. "Sure, I've seen 'em in museums. The fellow wouldn't dare—it's a bluff."

She choked, *"Bill!"* and with her manacled hands grabbed my sleeve.

The scream.

It came from down the corridor—not very far away. It didn't sound human; yet we knew that it had been torn from a human throat.

Another shriek split ours ears. And there were many shrieks. They shrilled and grated and jangled and made a Babel of hell that rang through the cavern. In them vibrated horror and terror and pain.

We cowered under the sound. My flesh chilled. My fingers closed on Betty's hands, and found them colder—cold as ice. Her eyes, squeezed almost shut, formed telegraphic dashes of anguish against the pallid skin.

A hoarse shout echoed. That voice! I had heard it before, somewhere. I struggled to remember where.

It said, "Now will you tell? The names of the Red Circle!"

Dull, like a weary sigh, came the answer: "No!"

And the screams again. And another sound, as of a creaking windlass. In the cell, we looked at each other, dreading. We had thought there could be no outcry more horrible than those first piercing shrieks. But *this!*

The moans, the gagging and gurgling, the choked sobs! Pitiful, the cries of agony ebbed into mere exhausted bleats, until there was only a sound of stifled groaning that panted away into tomb-like silence. . . .

The blob in my throat couldn't be swallowed.

I muttered, "There's whisky in my pocket, if you can get at it."

"No——"

"I could use a shot," I grunted.

BETTY stiffened. Her eyes grew round, not seeing me; her ears strained, not listening to my voice. What she heard—my ears caught it, too—was the whisper of leather shuffling over the flagged pavement.

The hooded shape of the torturer loomed up against the latticework. Iron clanked on iron. The door groaned open.

We crouched—the neck collars did not allow us to stand—looking up at the monster. His eyes inside the slitted cloth were rayed with bloodshot veins. His dead-fleshed hand clutched a braided whip, and the tip of the whiplash dripped beads of ruby blood. . . .

The voice flattened against the lank folds of the black hood.

"Now, will you name the officer?"

Betty said, "No," and her lips didn't tremble.

The fiend came into the cell. He unclasped the keys at his girdle and bent over the lock that moored her neck-chain to the wall. I lurched at him—I got my fingers wound around the leather gamashes.

He struck with the whip—not the tip, but the loaded butt. Pole-axed, stunned, I sprawled back against the wall. I shook my head, got my legs under me. . . .

He was dragging Betty out of the cell!

I think I went a little mad, then. I raved and cursed and threw myself at the door, and the collar fetched me back, wrenched and sprained. I fought that chain. I fought the gyves until the iron ached into the wrist-bones. Maybe a circus strong man could have burst those rusting links. Maybe Houdini could have slipped the handcuffs. What good did that do me?

I was helpless. Tears of rage and terror flowed down my cheeks. I squatted on my haunches and waited for the shrieks. . . . To my surprize, the torturer came into the cell again. He unlocked the gyves at my ankles and loosened the neck-chain from the wall.

I did not resist. I got up at his command and stumbled down the corridor—he behind, clutching the chain. . . .

The room widened. I blinked, stared. I saw a niche in the wall, and a flat altar, and a fire that burned with garnet and emerald flames. Its incandescence seared the eyeballs. Somehow I knew that fire had not been kindled by mortal hands. It was volcanic—that explained the abnormal hotness of the rock, too. . . . But I wasn't interested in the fire.

Against the wall drooped a female figure, nude, arms outstretched and braceletted in rusted clamps. I recognized Madame Charlotte. Her face, the color of flour, drooped over her naked bosom. One leg, up to the thigh, was gripped in a boot of iron.

At the toe of the boot spread a pool of blood.

She was not dead—yet. Bubbles formed in the froth that thickened on her lips.

My eyes jerked in the other direction, toward the pool. I saw Betty.

The torturer uttered a harsh laugh.

He said:

"I know you Americans! Ordinary torture will not drag a secret over your lips. You can stand pain. But you are weaklings for all that! You cannot stand to inflict pain. . . . Do you understand?" His hand twisted in the chain, flung me toward Betty. *"You are going to torture each other!"*

A curse jerked my jaw. My gaze pitched over the Wheel of Death. I saw the contrivance of brakes and levers that stuck up through the floor. My eyes followed the great iron shaft that crossed the pool and was bedded in the far wall. The wheel turned on that shaft.

There were two wheels, actually. Their spokes rayed off at an angle from the rims and meshed in a series of cogs around the shaft. The outer rim was wide, and had slats around its edge. It looked like a circular ladder, and its spokes were honed to razor sharpness.

The inner rim was smooth. Betty was tied—spread-eagled—inside it. Withes of leather bound her hands and ankles to

the ring. Its spokes, too, had been honed.

"You can't get away with this!" I blurted. And I bluffed. "I left a letter for the American consul. . . ."

Laughter jeered through the hood. "Good. The secret police will search your room."

He thrust me toward the wheel. Now I fought. I whirled, kicked. . . . The fiend's powerful hand closed vise-like on my ankle. I was hurled to the pavement. The shrouded form bent over me. The whip's butt rose and fell. Red waves of pain pumped through my temples.

I did not pass out. I was like a fighter who hears the count being tolled off, who sees the referee's arm rising and falling, but cannot get up off the floor.

I felt myself being lifted and carried to the wheel. I realized that my wrists and ankles were being strapped to the rungs of the outer rim. The iron gyves were loosened and clanked to the stone.

DIMLY, I saw the dead-flesh hand tug at one of the levers. The wheel began to move. . . . The shaft seemed to recede into the distant wall. Acrid fumes bit through my blurred senses. I stared down.

The wheel hung suspended over the pool. The outer rim was but inches from the green, heaving surface. The thick vapor curled around my feet. I heard Betty cough. I stared into her face. Our eyes were but a yard apart.

I said, "It's a bluff." I still tried to believe that.

Seven or eight feet away, standing on the brink of the pool, the monster laughed at us.

"You'll see!" he shouted. He walked to a crate that stood near the fiery altar—came back with a live rabbit that kicked and struggled. He lifted the poor creature by its ears and flung it into the pool.

The viscid fluid bubbled. In the depths, something stirred. Great fins, seamed with gleaming spines of bone, roiled the greenness. A head appeared. The flat, pulpy skull showed white, with eyes the size of dinner plates glittering through a fringe of writhing, eel-like lashes. The body resembled a sheet undulating just under the glaucous surface of the pool.

What sent a shudder of dread through me was the mouth. The open, pinkish slit had no teeth, but twin, saber-shaped ribs that closed on the struggling hare . . . devoured it at a gulp.

Slowly, the giant fins sank into the murky pool.

What was it? Some prehistoric seathing, I knew, whose ancestor had been trapped in the earthquake that lifted the headland from the ocean's bed. A thing that had adapted itself to existence in a pool of hot, acrid slime. A thing that fed on living flesh!

The hooded man chuckled. He said, "You like my pets?" He shook with evil mirth as he stooped and lifted from the floor a long wooden pike bladed like a timberjack's peavey.

"Now you shall try my toys."

Fear whiplashed my flesh as he stabbed the pike toward Betty. That blade, blood-rusted, chopping at her hands! I twisted in frenzy. But he only slashed the withes that bound her limbs.

She could move. She could balance herself inside that wheel. Its inner tread had a width of only eight inches, and looked dangerously slick, but she could grasp the sides with her hands. She had to, or fall into the pool. . . .

And now he sliced the thongs away from my wrists and ankles. I clung to the rungs of the wheel.

The torturer jerked another lever. And the wheel turned! My weight carried it down swiftly, toward the slimy, boiling

cauldron where my glance divined the waiting sheeted forms of the pool monsters.

I climbed. For my life, I climbed. And the motion of my climbing treadmilled the wheel around. And that was not all; for, by means of the spoke and gear-box connection, the inner wheel also turned—speeded up by the cogs—driven by my climbing.

And therefore Betty had to keep walking around and around inside its whirling circumference. Her naked feet padded up and down, her hands steadied themselves against the motion.

The torturer howled at me:

"You can save her! All you have to do is jump off."

And he jeered at her. "The name! The officer's name?"

I CLIMBED like a monkey against that wheel. Hand over hand and foot over foot I ran up the slats that kept turning under me. And inside the inner wheel, Betty walked. Her body was very straight and lovely in the wispy *sac de nuit*.

She slipped — tottered. I stopped climbing. The wheel fell and I went down with it. The green slime roiled around the pulpy head of white that struck up. . . .

Damn. My foot.

I climbed. It was only my shoe. The saber-ribbed mouth had closed on the sole. I looked at Betty. She could not keep this up much longer. My own arms and legs ached. Sweat streamed down my face, pattered like the drip of hot grease on the seething pool. The vapor swam up and scalded in my lungs.

And I gulped down the noxious fumes. Maybe I would be overcome by them. That would be the easiest way. And I cursed myself for a coward because I could not throw myself into the cauldron.

A scream!

I twisted—stared—and saw Madame Charlotte's face lifted up from her bosom. She struggled against the wall, and her mouth spilled a name.

"————!" she cried; and the name was the name of the Dictator.

The hooded man turned, looked at her. "I will attend to you in a moment," he said harshly.

But—the Dictator? Grim pictures played through my mind. The frightened fisherman. The whispers in the streets. The men who disappeared. . . .

Was this what happened to them? This, the terror that lived in the land?

Madame Charlotte shrieked again. The sound echoed and vibrated under the roof. And the hooded man's laughter echoed with it.

He did not see what Madame Charlotte saw—what I saw, too.

The snake.

It flowed white along the basalt flagging of the floor. The head raised on its wattled throat, and the forked tongue stabbed. . . . I must have touched the right knob at the moment that the noose tightened. . . . And the snake must have smelled the blood.

Madame Charlotte moaned a warning. Too late, the hooded man saw. He stooped for the peavey—and the snake was upon him. He yelled. That voice! Of course! It was blurred by the folds of the hood, and yet I knew. . . .

I knew even before I saw his face. He tore himself away from the great serpent, ripping and losing his black rope and spilling the hood from his head. And his face was the face of the waiter in the café on the *piazza*.

He rolled over and over on the basalt blocks, trying to push the snake away with his hands. He rolled too far. His shoulders and his hips went over the brink into the pool.

He yelled.

His fingers clawed on the stone, and he half pulled himself up from the boiling slime. But then a formless white thing surged up, roiling the green, suddenly showing its flat head and glittering eyes.

The waiter sank down into the pool. Afterward, a red stain floated and made a murky scum on the viscid, uneasy mass.

The albino snake reared up, tall as a man, looking with its beady lurid eyes at the swirl in the pool where the man had gone down. Then it turned, and oozed across the floor toward Madame Charlotte. In the hot light that fell from the fire on the altar, the pink stains under the scabrous white reptile skin got bright. The venom flowed from its mouth and down its wattles and left milky blobs on the floor.

Madame Charlotte did not shriek now. She bent her head down from the wall, her arms writhing taut from the iron staples, and she puckered her lips. She tried to whistle.

"God help her!" I heard Betty say.

The snake didn't pause. Perhaps the blood about the toe of the boot excited it. There was a motion of striking too fast for the eye to follow. . . .

After a time, the serpent left its victim, and crawled onto the altar and sunned itself before the volcanic fire.

And still I climbed!

There was no hope now. We were alone—horribly alone—in the bowels of the earth. The Wheel of Death turned on, and no hand to stop it.

"This is the end," Betty said. She was very tired, and sick with the motion of the wheel. Her shoulders slumped, her feet dragged in their endless walking.

I groaned. "Betty—can you jump to the brink—if I stop the wheel?"

There was one way I could stop it. . . .

Her eyes implored me. "Bill, oh God! Don't leave me here alone——"

And I was craven. I climbed. Despair like a black tide swept over me. Clawing and stumbling, with hands that slipped sweat-wet and feet that were leaden lumps, I crawled up the endless turning rungs. I sucked the rotten, miasmic air into my lungs. Fainting with it, I bit my tongue, until blood spurted against my teeth and the pain shocked life into muscles that knotted in burning agony.

In the turgid green fluid at my feet, the waiting bodies of the pool-monsters were crouched like white-shrouded ghouls. . . .

I choked, "Betty, you can jump it?"

But could she? A good eight feet?

Her voice rang clear. "I'm dropping off when you do, Bill!"

And I climbed. I clung to the lower section of the falling wheel, and the weight of my body lurched numb pain into my fingers. The ache crept up the hands, to the wrists, the shoulders. I felt my hands stiffening. Death flowed cold in my veins.

Death! And I wanted to live—though death couldn't hurt—much—and life was a thing of torture.

Climbing, I twisted my head; stared through eyes that dimmed with the surge of blood behind their sockets. I must have gone a little mad then. In that crazed instant I thought of jumping—trying to bridge the pool at a leap.

The man never lived that could have done it. Not while the wheel turned, robbing him of foothold. I wondered how many men had *tried* it—and fed the pool monsters.

Climbing, always climbing, I looked the other way, and stared down the raying spokes to the gear box and the shaft. And somehow I knew that men had tried that, too. They would have snatched at the razor-edged spokes, tried

to slide down to the shaft. I saw them—flesh and bone of their hands hacked through by the sword-blades—falling and waving the bleeding stumps of their wrists as they careened into the pool!

It would be suicide to try—just an uglier, more hellishly cruel way of dying.

I climbed.

And now Betty was on her hands and knees—crawling inside the rim—slipping and sliding and clawing at its polished slickness. A giant fin slit the pool murk; a pulpy white head lifted hungry, glittering eyes that feasted on the girl's supple curves.

The bottle!

The whisky bottle in my coat! The bump of it against my ribs as I swayed, sick. . . .

"Hang on, Betty!" I panted. "One more minute!"

God, there *was* a chance! A chance that went straight to the center of the hellish contraption—the demoniacal cunning of it—the fact that it was a double wheel, and that the outer rim turned the inner.

If I could climb with one hand——

I couldn't. For the last ten minutes, it had been all I could do to climb with both of them. This thing couldn't be physically possible. And I did it. Life was stronger than death in me—and I used the free hand to get the bottle out of my pocket.

A chance? Rather, the thousandth part of a chance! But my hand curled on the heavy glass, and my arm cocked itself. *I climbed.* I sighted down the spokes—kept my eye on the target—muttered a prayer.

If I missed——

But I dared not think of missing. I threw the bottle, hard.

The bottle wasn't in the air a million years. It only seemed that long.

The smash of glass! The wheel jerked, *stopped.*

It was luck—or the prayer. I had succeeded in slamming that bottle into the gears. In good American slang—a monkeywrench in the machinery!

And I climbed—dragged myself to the top of the rim. I stared down, across the pool, at the floor. It looked very far away. I wanted to rest. My legs fluttered, were flaccid.

I couldn't trust that glass. It was slippery, it was breakable, too. . . .

The thought nerved me. I jumped. The basalt block seemed to rise up and hit me in the face . . . blessed sight! I staggered to the lever, threw my weight on it. The wheel moved on its sliding shaft—came in—and Betty fell limp, sobbing, into my arms.

MAYBE reporters have printer's ink in their veins. What Betty said was, "What a story!"

"We haven't got the story—yet," I grunted.

Betty's eyes made circles. "Bill Kyle, are you crazy? I'm captured by secret police—tortured to make me reveal the name of the officer who gave me the mutiny tip—I escape by a miracle—and I haven't got a story!"

"Maybe it wasn't the secret police," I said. I went over my side of the adventure. "It looks like a Red Circle plot from start to finish, as I see it. Why did Madame Charlotte borrow my gun, except to get it away from me?"

"She wanted it to defend herself with," Betty said.

"She didn't make much use of it, then. Of course, she might have been tackled from behind. But then why did she suddenly come to and warn the torturer about the snake?"

"Because she knew it'd kill her next."

"And why did she shout the Dictator's name?" I demanded.

"Because," said Betty, "she thought it was him. It sounded just like his voice."

"That's the suspicious part," I argued. "They wanted us to *think* it was the Dictator. Figure it this way. Suppose that snake hadn't come when it did—you'd have named the officer, to save my life if not your own. Suppose even that you hadn't talked! We'd both have been taken off the wheel and thrown into a cell to think it over—that's my guess. The torturer would have disappeared, and again I'll guess that he'd have taken Madame Charlotte with him. Then in a short while one of the Red Circle agents would have come along to 'rescue us'—and I'll bet that the rescuer would have been this same waiter."

"But why?" Betty gasped.

"Because you and I would have shot the story into the American newspapers. We'd have made the front pages, too," I said. "I can see the headlines right now: DICTATOR TORTURES AMERICAN GIRL. And then I seem to see another headline: U. S. LANDS MARINES—and a couple of days later, DICTATOR FLEES; KING BACK ON THRONE. That's what the royalists were shooting at."

Betty shook her head. "It won't do, Bill. It's all guesswork."

The rest was ghastly, nauseating; but I called myself a newspaperman, and I had to do it. Suspicion wasn't enough. I had to *know*.

I went to the wall—to the gruesomeness that had been Madame Charlotte. There was sticky redness on the iron boot; my flesh crawled, and my fingers were numb on the wing-screws. "We'll see if she was on the level," I muttered. "If she was really tortured—or if she faked those yells."

The boot came off. Madame Charlotte's leg from the knee down dangled queerly; but whole, well rounded, with a delicate high arch of instep. . . . And this was all that *was* whole and rounded and delicate of her.

"But the blood?" Betty gasped.

"We *saw* one rabbit die," I reminded her. "Its mate probably supplied the blood."

ANYWAY, that was how I telephoned the story into the Paris office when we got back to the hotel at two a. m.

I suppose my voice did sound thick; my tongue had swollen badly where I'd bitten it that time.

I heard my editor laugh. "That's fine. Now you take another cold shower and drink another gallon of black coffee." He kept on laughing. "Seeing albino snakes! That's a new one."

But I wasn't drunk. I've told the truth, so help me; and if you won't take my word for it, ask my wife.

Ask Betty.

The Crystal Curse

By EANDO BINDER

A veritable weird rhapsody in blue is this fascinating story of dual personality and a man who bridged the gulfs between the dimensions of space

MY COUSIN, the writer of the following words, died insane—or so say the doctors. I wish I could believe them. In his last conscious moments before he died of thrombosis—insane or not—he whispered to me of a sealed envelope among his personal belongings. The envelope was addressed to me, his closest living relative; the carefully written sheets it contained were excerpts from his diary. My wife points out that for material from a diary, it is oddly bookish—descriptive and full of narrative. She thinks George made it up, a last outcropping of his small success as a writer. She agrees with the hospital diagnosis of his mental condition at the time of death, and long preceding. I wish I could.

• • • • • • •

EXCERPT from the diary of George Borland, dated August 3rd: It has been another of these sultry dog-days, and even now, at close to midnight, the air is still clammy and warm. Well, nothing important happened today. No, nothing of importance except—silly to think of it, but I have had a most strange experience—in a dream. I will put it down, probably to laugh at it sometime in the future.

Came home from the office listless, no doubt because of the humid weather. I had the evening free of any sort of appointment, so I peeled off most of my clothes, turned the radio on and the lights off, and stretched my lanky form over the sofa. In this state of semi-comfort, with but the faintest of breezes from the open window to relieve my sweating body, I lay with a mind as blank as clean sheets of paper. The radio program barely impinged on my laggard senses.

It was the moonlight, streaming in through the open window like a flood of liquid silver, that first attracted me to the sapphire in my watch-fob. Sparkling eerily in the moonlight, it seemed to draw me—to intrigue me. Or maybe it was imagination.

The fob, I suppose, had slipped from my vest pocket when I draped my suit over the back of a chair. The faint breeze tugged at the leather-weave strand to

● Here is another fascinating weird tale by the two talented Binder brothers, Earl and Otto, who write their delectable stories under the pen name Eando (E. and O.) Binder. This symphony in blues is one of the most striking tales that the brothers Binder have ever hammered out on their typewriter, and we commend it to your attention, knowing that you will enjoy it. The illustration on the opposite page is the work of still a third brother in this talented family: John ("Jack") Binder.

"The old men gazed at him with eager eyes."

which it was attached, and the motion it imparted to the fob caused the stone to twinkle oddly with shafts of blue and indigo and violet. Then I had it in my hand, unconscious almost of having reached for it, and was peering at it closely. Near to my eye, it seemed, instead of glinting, to be merely glowing, like a tiny patch of sunlit sky. Idly I turned it over in my hand, trying to count its many facets. I gave that up wearily but then noticed, on peering still closer, that there were clusters of almost invisible bubbles immersed in its crystal-clear depths.

Gazing into the lambent heart of the sapphire, I felt my eyes grow heavy. It seemed that I made an effort to tear my-

self away from the hypnotic influence of the scintillations, and that some power—oh, it's silly, I know—but it seemed some external power, or *will*, held my eyes to the stone. . . .

Suddenly I was in a bath of violet-blue fog that shimmered like tinsel, engulfing me completely. I had the sensation of sinking, drifting feather-like, through endless layers of cerulean mists, as though being sucked into the depths of a deep lake. It was rather a pleasant and strange sensation. Strata upon strata of blueness eddied past me, exhibiting every shade and tone of that color there could possibly be. I began to feel the exuberance a bird must feel, circling the vaults of the sky.

Then, with an abruptness that shook my nerves, I found myself lying supine in a place strange to me. There was a redolence of earthiness in my nostrils. By the help of a dim luminescence that seemed to radiate from the solid ceiling of clay and earth, my eyes distinguished the details of this queer place. The chamber was roughly oblong, not more than twenty feet long and but half as wide and deep. One end was blank wall, but the other bore the outline of a doorway.

Jerking myself to a sitting position, I stared about, perplexed. My body lay, or had lain, full length on a bedding of fine-spun cloth of peculiar texture, which covered a rude wooden cot. Besides this there was no other article of furniture in the chamber except a small three-legged table on which reposed several objects of bone and tinted metal, strangely shaped, and beside them a thick book of crude construction. Dust covered everything and spiders had spun their webs in every corner. But my body was clean and free of dust, and also the big book on the table.

For a moment I stared around in amazement; I had the feeling that I knew the place—had seen it before. The sensation passed quickly, and in its stead came a subtle dread. What eery cavern was this? What was the meaning of my presence in it? Tomb-like in its aspect, it chilled my heart. My scalp tingled.

And then in the utter silence I thought I heard echoes of strange voices. The ghostly light from the walls and ceiling seemed to flicker now and then on shadowy forms which had no material substance.

In sudden unreasoning fear, I leaped from the low couch, possessed of but one thought—to get to the open air from this sepulchral underground chamber. I stumbled to the door and beat it frantically with clenched fists, shouting wildly. The reverberations of my own voice thundered in my ears till I was giddy from the noise of it. I leaned against the wall at one side, panting, and again there was a flash—like a twinkle of light in a rolling fog—of a previous memory of my surroundings. Suddenly calm after my panic-stricken outburst, I perceived that the door was equipped with a small handle.

Turning it, and putting my shoulder to the wood, I shoved the ponderous portal wide, to find beyond it an inky blankness. I shuddered in dismay. It looked like no more than the gateway to some vast depth of empty space.

But it offered my only chance to escape the place, and with reckless bravery I plunged into the gloom, feeling my way along one clammy wall. Like a corridor in the heart of a lightless world, it stretched endlessly to my unnumbered footsteps, till over my shoulder the doorway of the chamber I had left dwindled to a tiny ruby glow. How like a horrible nightmare, and yet how vividly undreamlike it was!

A cold sweat chilled my forehead as I pictured fancied dangers before me. I stopped now and then, trembling in uncertain terror. Ghastly echoes of unnamable things from unknown throats seemed to whisper in my tingling ears, as though mocking my futile progress.

How long I wandered along this midnight passageway, reeling in mind and body, I do not know; but finally I met a barrier of wood. Eagerly I felt for the outline of the doorway—if door it was—and my hands clutched a handle.

Swinging outward, the heavy door, fully as ponderous as the other had been, brought with its opening a blessed wave of fresh, cool air. I staggered through into a roughly circular chamber from whose one side high up came shafts of bright light. Blinking in the sudden radiance, I ran to where a stairway hewn in stone led upward to the source of the light. In another moment I had parted thick bushes which hid the entrance, and stood in the open air.

Panting and shaking, I stared about me. I found myself by the side of a road; overhead hung a pall of leaden blue sky. The horizon was obscured in all directions by a haze similar to early morning mists, but hauntingly different in some respects. The shroud in the sky was uniform, and gave an immediate suggestion of oppression: it seemed to press down, to limit—to be slowly and relentlessly closing in. Something of panic again seized me, and I tried to pierce the azure mists which hemmed me in, for a chance glimpse of something familiar by which to get my bearings.

My immediate vicinity seemed to be entirely meadowland, whose luxuriant grasses covered the ground with a brilliant green carpet. Farther in the distance, half-way around the horizon, were forests, seemingly of the fir variety, as though this were northern land. My eyes dropped to the road near which I stood, and I saw it was paved with crude wooden blocks.

This road wound erratically as my vision followed it, but remained entirely in view, as though ascending. Then I saw, looming ghost-like in the blue pall, a huge castle, not more than a mile away. Although it was obscured in detail, I could distinguish the serrate outline of the great structure, with its many spires, watch-towers, and abutments. It reminded me of medieval castles of Europe I had seen pictured, yet had the same surreptitious, haunting difference that everything else here seemed to have from the normal objects they resembled.

Perched on the broad tor of a spreading hill, the castle seemed to be battling the slimy, curling, electric-blue mists which hovered, almost sentiently, over this queer land. Hurling an unvoiced challenge, the hoary man-made edifice stood like a symbol of Man's eternal battle against the forces of Nature, and it brought a warm glow to my somewhat chilled heart and mind.

Breaking from my revery, I decided to approach the castle, where surely I must find people of some sort who would help me in my unprecedented predicament. Hardly had I started, when I observed the whirling mists grow suddenly thicker all about the castle, engulfing it completely. At the same time, the baffling, intangible stuff—which was neither moist, nor cool, nor definable to my sense of touch—closed around me inexorably, as though the skies above had fallen.

There was a strange sensation of motion. . . .

I started up from the sofa bewildered. Here I was in my room, the radio going, the moonlight bathing my near-nudeness—all normal and sensible as it should be. I rubbed my eyes, picked up the watch-

fob with the glinting sapphire from where it had fallen on the carpet, and laughed in relief. What a dream!

AUGUST 7th—Weather still sultry, as it has been now for a week. It is really a trial to do anything. I could write here of the day's little things—getting called down for day-dreaming at the office, for instance.

But the big thing that's burning in my brain is not what happened today while I was awake, but instead what I . . . well, what I dreamed again!

Well, speculation aside [The diary is evidently incomplete here.—EANDO.] . . . this evening when I came home from work I made myself comfortable, almost naked, on the sofa—it's getting to be a habit these hot summer evenings—and listening to the radio in the dark. At the time I did not realize how identically things happened as they did four evenings ago, even when the fob again dangled from my vest pocket, twinkling its inset sapphire in the moonlight before my blank eyes. I reached for it idly, peering into its iridescent depths at the bubbles that seemed to froth about as though alive.

Suddenly, with a start, I remembered my dream of that other evening, and I peered at it in deeper interest. Maybe it was just the humidity, or my being tired; again it may have been some sort of hypnotic influence from the sparkling shafts of fiery blues and violets in my heavy eyes, but I just winked out like a light there on the sofa. Then came my dream. . . .

Immersed in a world of lapis-lazuli fog, I felt myself floating downward through strata of indigo, royal blue, pale ultramarine, and cerulean shades. Then it changed and I was cooled in a cauldron of frost blue and ice blue, gelid and congealed blue. With a shower of sparkles I slithered through electric blues, China blues, crystal blues. Blissfully soothed, I soared as a bird might through opal blues, sky blues, mauve blues, and water blues. Like an aimless feather I fell through rosy blues, iridescent blues, limpid blues, and topaz blues. Then, with a nameless uneasiness coming over me, I drifted in a mist of melancholy blue, which changed abruptly to poison and oppressive blues.

The last wisps of dull and venom blue whirled away fitfully, and with a crawling of my spine I found myself lying full length in a ghastly glow of phosphorescent light. The full remembrance of that other horrible experience came upon me; the breath choked in my throat. Was I again in that sepulchral crypt which the spiders had made their home for unmolested years?

It was the same place! With a gasp I sat up, already hearing the maddening echoes and ghostly mockings that seemed part of this subterranean cavern. I prepared to leap from the couch, tigerishly wild in my desire to escape—but a hand pressed lightly on my shoulder!

I twisted my head to one side, in the direction of the little table, and then relaxed, still sitting up on the couch. There beside me was a curious old man; his hand rested soothingly on my shoulder. I saw then that the huge tome was open and there were finger marks in the dust of the table. The old man gazed at me with eager eyes, and his presence so dispelled the funereal atmosphere of the place that I smiled a greeting to him, too astounded yet to speak. He then pressed my shoulder more firmly, indicating I should lie down, and this I did, watching him as he turned to the open volume on the table.

Small and bent with great age, the venerable old fellow, chin adorned with a long silvery beard, stooped over the

book, reading. He was dressed outlandishly, like a medieval priest of some wealthy cult, his toga resplendent with golden threads among silken designs alien to my eye. On his head was a bulky miter-like hat, inset with sparkling gems, oriental in aspect; yet the face beneath it was the face of a white man, noble with centuries of gentle breeding. His features were puzzling, Arabic in fineness and complexion, but with thin, Nordic lips and grave blue eyes. His gnarled fingers, as he turned the pages of the tome, flashed gem-encrusted rings in the pale rosy glow from above.

As I fretted in impatience, my fingers accidentally encountered something strapped across my chest, and for the first time I looked down at my body. That other time I had been here I had not noticed—but now I saw that I was clothed in a harness of soft leather whose broad straps lay against my bare flesh. At my waist, attached to a gem-studded belt, was a short skirt of silken texture, embellished with queer symbols. My legs and arms were bare, but one finger of each hand held a golden ring, and on my feet were sandals of thick leather tied to my ankles with thongs of meshed silver. I also noticed that the muscles of my arms and legs were powerful and bulging, even in repose, and the breadth of my chest was unbelievable. Unless it was a trick of the flickering glow from the ceiling, I was a veritable giant of a man with the strength of a bear! Plainly, it was not I—as I knew myself.

I had no further time to conjecture over this miraculous thing, for the aged man turned from his book and addressed me in a solemn voice. He spoke softly and with apparent respect, but with articulations I had never heard before! He ended after a moment with a note of interrogation, and I shook my head bewildered. A look of surprize came to his features, and also in his eyes I saw a gleam of uneasiness. He spoke again, more slowly and distinctly, but I shook my head vigorously.

Thereupon the old man stared at me perplexedly, and I, just as puzzled, stared back at him. For a tiny instant I had seemed to understand him—felt the impression of subtle familiarity—but it did not last, and we were silent before each other after I tried a few words of English and French on him.

I waited for him to make the next move, and suddenly the old priest—somehow he impressed me as a priest or patriarch—turned to his book and feverishly leafed its yellowed pages. When next he turned to me, he had in his hand a small thin rod of bone, with a carved metal tip. Waving the wand over my face in curious configurations, he muttered a cadence that writhed through the air like the sibilant hissing of snakes. I felt my senses reel as the rhythmic rune drummed into my ears, and the fogs of blueness that I knew so well danced before my eyes in legions of shade and tone. Royal blue and plum blue, tepid blue and wash blue—in tune with his softly modulated accents, they contorted in weird designs before me, forming mystic symbols and achingly remembered, yet not cognizable, letter forms.

Then a smoke-curl of rich, vibrating blue weaved purposefully in the air and wound itself on an invisible framework into a symbol that seemed to burn into my brain and put it afire. With searing force the symbol drummed at the closed portals of my subconscious mind, and suddenly poured through.

I SPRANG up with a cry, for it seemed my brain was bathed in hot acid, and shouted for the old priest to stop. He withdrew his weaving wand, and hushed his hypnotic chant; and the flames in my

brain died away. Then the venerable old man smiled in a pleased manner, for I had spoken to him in his own tongue!

"You understand at last, Prince Dahrin, do you not?"

"Yes," I answered fluently in the strange tongue. "Not only your words, but—other things. . . . It is not clear in my mind."

"Do you know me—and yourself?"

"I know your name to be Shorro-Kal, and mine to be Prince Dahrin, but beyond that——"

I stopped in perplexity. The aged man stroked his silvery beard thoughtfully, gazing at me with quiet eyes. Presently he said: "You have heard these names before: Jorentia—the Miskovites—Castle Oppor—Princess Alvena?"

"Yes, yes!" I cried, each name arousing strangely familiar, but always submerged, memories. "Yet of the connection they have with me, I know nothing, save a vague impression that they mean much to me——"

"And you to them," finished Shorro-Kal cryptically.

"Tell me more!" I said then. "Tell me all about those things. Somehow I want to know more. What land is this? What is this clammy, underground vault in which I have awakened from some mysterious sleep?"

I panted in my eagerness, for the power of the mystic blue symbol seemed to have charged my mind like an electric battery, and it had opened doors beyond which were scenes clouded in vagueness and mystery.

"Do not exert yourself, Prince Dahrin," admonished Shorro-Kal. "You have just awakened from a long, mesmeric sleep, and your heart and nerves must not be taxed with the duties of wakeful life too suddenly."

I lay back at his words, and he continued: "I will tell you a few things to refresh the memory which in your long sleep has seemed to become sadly lacking. Jorentia, then, is this land in which we live, and of which you are the last of its extraregal princes. The Miskovites are the race who hold us in bondage, and may Tordok—who is our great God—blast them to damnation soon if I fail in my last desperate attempt to free our fair land of them. Castle Oppor—so old that the records of its construction have been lost—is, of course, our royal stronghold. And the Princess Alvena—do you not know her, Prince Dahrin? Can you not remember that you and she were——"

He paused suggestively. My mind seemed to break into a turmoil; fleeting impressions drummed at the portals of my waking thought—impressions of a ravishingly beautiful girl, whose grave, troubled eyes seemed to look at me sadly. For a long minute I attempted to remember more, but without success.

I relaxed wearily. "No, I do not, Shorro-Kal. She is much to me, it seems, but——" I pressed a puzzled hand to my forehead.

Shorro-Kal shook his head sorrowfully. "Strange!—strange indeed that you cannot remember *her*. Well, all in good time. I am sure that once you have seen Castle Oppor and those surroundings so familiar to you, memory will come back. As for this underground chamber, it is an ancient burial place for knaves and evildoers who were executed by royal decree. Under this chamber, which is but a connection to the unnumbered catacombs below, lie the bones of countless evil men, for the kings of Jorentia, in olden times, buried them here for ages. It is said that their spirits sometimes wander through the upper labyrinths, in one part of which we are now, and drive to madness any mortals who dare to disturb their rest."

"How well I know!" I agreed, vehemently. "During my last period of wake-

fulness, I could feel their presence—somehow. By the way, that last time I fell to unconsciousness outside these corridors—how was I brought back here?"

Shorro-Kal nodded. "I found you lying by the road and carried you back in, as there is much danger in your being outside at present. I have visited this place every day for a long time—ever since you were immersed in your . . . sleep."

"*You* carried me in!" I smiled incredulously. "I doubt you could have dragged me this far, much less carried me."

"Ah, Prince Dahrin," replied my companion with an odd smile, "have you forgotten who I am? I have powers that at will can give me the strength of ten men. Forget not that I, and I alone, have dared to use these forbidden chambers of the dead, whose spirits have vainly tried to bring about my ruin."

"But why have you used this chamber, defying the spirits? And how long have I been asleep? And what sickness has been upon me? This is a most uncanny place for a sick-bed!"

I looked into the grave eyes of the aged priest, but his answer was evasive: "You have heard enough for the present, Prince Dahrin. You must now go to sleep, and awake to another life——"

The old priest took from an inner part of his robe the wand of bone and metal and waved it before my face, mumbling some mysterious incantation that soothed me to sleep. The fogs of blue descended over me, shimmering in hues that were of many colors and yet were nothing but blue. Shorro-Kal faded into the ultramarine mists and with him the chamber and all in it. . . .

Then I was awake, blinking in astonishment at the room revealed in the moonlight, my ears suddenly filled with the music of a dance orchestra from the radio. The sapphire and fob lay on the floor.

For an hour I just sat and thought over the vividness of my dream. Now I am writing and it is after midnight. After reading over what I have written, I see that I have made it sound as though it actually happened. To the critical eye it would seem that the thing must be mostly imagination, as dreams are never so well ordered nor so logical in their sequence. Yet that is exactly what the dream was in detail!

Dual personality . . . splitting of the consciousness . . . an unborn twin . . . something of that sort. . . . [There are apparently several deletions at this point. —EANDO.]

As for the "blue" complex in this and that other dream—that comes from falling asleep while gazing at the sapphire. Perhaps, just as an experiment, I shall try—days from now when the memory of this dream is hazy—to put myself asleep again with the sapphire in front of my eyes, and see if I get another "blue" dream out of it.

AUGUST 20th—Tonight I shall not attempt to put any trivialities at all under this date, nor shall I deny that in some sixteen hours, the last half-hour has been the most eventful—the last half-hour, and that taken up with but a dream!

Looking back at the entries of the 3rd, and again the 7th, I see that those dreams I had were singularly detailed, as though being real experiences. I also notice that at the end of the entry for the 7th, I promised to try the "experiment" again, just for curiosity, using the sapphire as—well, as an inducer of sleep. I did just that, and with an uncanny ease I fell into sleep and—the dream. That occurred just an hour ago, and somehow I feel, instinctively, that I am being drawn into something above and beyond ordinary

things. The sapphire seems to exert a powerful influence on me when I am alone in the dark. Imagination?—hypersensitivity? — delusion? — I have ceased groping for an explanation. I record the dream I had under the influence of the gem in my fob—my mother's parting, loving gift—just as it came to me. . . .

First of all, there was again that indescribable drift through layers of blueness. All the words in our language could not begin to do justice to the strangeness of it, nor the beauty of it. There were thousands of blues, all different—all blue. Then again the awakening in the underground cavern which lies over the dust of countless dead. Just as twice before, there was the ghostly light shimmering on a myriad of spider webs, on clammy clay walls, on the table, and on my body—that new and powerful body dressed in the abbreviated harness of a Prince of Jorentia. There I was lying; a few minutes before I had been George Borland, citizen of the United States, in a world that knew nothing of the dreamland of Jorentia.

I turned my eyes to find Shorro-Kal thumbing through the huge tome on the table, stroking his long gray beard with gnarled old fingers. I called his name, sitting up, and he turned with a bow and a weaving salute of his old hands.

"You have slept long, Prince Dahrin," were his first words. "Tordok has been good, and I think you are fully recovered from that spell which has lain on you for so long."

"I am greatly refreshed, Shorro-Kal," I returned, "but tormented by a hunger nearly as great as my curiosity."

The old priest smiled. "Then come, Prince. I shall this day satisfy both hungers—of the mind and of the body. Put your strong young body to that door and open the way to the outside."

I sprang from my couch with alacrity, and pushed the huge, ponderous door outward, revealing the midnight darkness of the passage beyond. I shivered in remembrance of how the first time I had awakened alone and had traversed the stygian corridor, my mind a prey to the evil spirits that haunted the labyrinths. But my venerable companion went first through the doorway, and in his hand he held the bone wand, from whose oddly shaped metal tip now shone a steady white light like a beacon. We walked along in the deserted, dank cavern, and I saw it to be curved and steadily rising. At the second door I again applied my shoulder, exulting in the tremendous strength of my lithe young body.

Then we were in the lighted pit whose egress to the outer air was so carefully camouflaged with bushes, and from there we stepped to the comparative brilliance of daylight, although I saw that again the skies were overcast with a leaden blue pall.

Saying never a word, Shorro-Kal whistled with puckered lips and from a clump of trees near by came a figure leading three horses. To Prince Dahrin, there was nothing in the horses to excite wonder, but in the memory of George Borland (as I now write) they were creatures having no comparison on earth. Somehow, I can find no words to describe the difference, because the variations were not such as having two extra legs, or feathers instead of hair, or anything of that sort. They were horses, but as subtly different from earthly horses as the topography I saw, though earth-like, was yet *not* earth-like!

The lackey, having come up, bowed and saluted me more elaborately than Shorro-Kal had done before, and looked at me with a light of worship in his eyes. I was mystified by this and also by his words of greeting: "Hail, noble Prince Dahrin! There will be great rejoicing at

Castle Oppor with the return of her great prince, long thought dead!"

I turned to the old priest inquiringly, but he was already trying to mount one of the steeds, and I ran to help him, the lackey beside me. Then, at Shorro-Kal's gesture, I vaulted lightly into my own saddle, intuitively knowing that I had ridden horses all my life here in Jorentia. At a slow pace, for the old priest was not able to ride at a gallop, we went a piece along the road paved with cemented blocks of wood, toward the castle that I had seen upon my first awakening. But the lackey, in the lead, suddenly veered into the forest before we had gone half-way, following an obscure trail that wound among the trees. Mystified, I followed, seeing that Shorro-Kal also went that way.

In a short time we had reached the castle by a winding route, coming before the utter sheerness of its one mighty wall. There was no moat at this point, for what enemy could scale the blank stone towering a hundred feet up?

"Why have we come here?" I inquired. "We cannot enter through solid walls."

For answer, the venerable priest beat a short tattoo with his wand on the stone before him, and a great oblong section of the wall sank silently into the ground. Our horses crossed over the leveled top of the sunken piece and we dismounted in a small, completely enclosed courtyard. The giant oblong of wall then arose to its place soundlessly, sealing the wall as though an integral part of it.

The lackey, after a respectful bow, led the horses away through one portal, and Shorro-Kal shuffled slowly toward another door, beckoning me to follow. We stepped into a small room from which led many corridors to the various parts of the great Castle Oppor. The priest led the way down one and we traversed its great length, meeting not a soul.

"Is the Castle Oppor untenanted?" I asked at last, unable to bear the utter silence.

"Nay, Prince," smiled Shorro-Kal. "But I have purposely chosen a deserted passageway to reach the princess' chambers, as at present no one save certain trusted persons must know of your return. Even your own people—those faithful thousands who would weep with joy to see you—must be kept in ignorance of your presence yet for a time."

WE MADE our way up gloomy stairs and through dusty passageways, and my aged companion finally stopped before a wooden door and tapped on it lightly. I fretted, as there was a long wait. Then the door opened. Suddenly I felt strangely weak, why I did not know. That I was to see the Princess Alvena, I knew—and that for some reason it was to be a joyful meeting. A womanly face peered at us and lit up with joy at seeing me. This woman, a maid-servant, bowed low before me and gave me the royal salute, as had Shorro-Kal and the lackey before her. Then the priest had grabbed my arm and was tugging me forward, for I seemed to be paralyzed.

In the center of the immense, richly adorned chamber beyond the door was a couch, and from that couch strode a woman whose grace and beauty increased by the same law that governs the intensity of gravitation between celestial bodies. Then she stood before me, heavenly blue eyes moist, and my senses reeled—for I knew then that her face was dear to me, and that I loved her.

We were in each other's arms then, muttering broken endearments. Finally the Princess Alvena pushed me away from her gently, and looked over my body as though expecting to see me deformed.

"Thank Tordok that you have come

back as you left, dear lover. Despite Shorro-Kal's repeated assurances, I secretly feared that you might suffer hurt, in mind or body. Tell me, dearest, did you discover the Great Secret which you sought in that magic land?"

"Did I what?" I asked, frowning in perplexity.

The princess opened her eyes wide. "The Great Secret of Deliverance! Don't you remember——"

She faltered, seeing the perfectly blank look in my face, and stared horrified, it seemed. "Then—then—it *did* do you harm! not to your body, but to your—mind!"

I turned around to get an answer to the riddle from the old priest, but he was gone. "Princess Alvena," I said slowly, "I don't know what you mean. In fact, I am in a fog of doubt about everything except a few names. But one thing I know—I love you!"

With a tremulous cry, the princess fell into my arms. "It is no matter, lover, that your mind is not yet clear. Doubtless Shorro-Kal will remedy that. But come, there is food, and you must be hungry—you who have not eaten for three years!"

Three years! Where had I been for three years? But hunger drove speculation from my mind. I ate of tempting foods in the chambers of the princess, and said nothing as she watched me from across the small table. Somehow there was no need for words between us, and we grew happy in a blissful and mute understanding. While gradually appeasing my surprizing hunger, I feasted my eyes upon her breath-taking beauty. Of all the beautiful shades of blue I had seen before the awakening in the underground crypt, none of them could compare with the wonderful celestial blue of this princess' eyes. And with a soft rose and cream complexion, delicate features of aristocratic mold and hair of flushed gold, her sweet face formed a honeyed complement to those tender eyes that reflected only innocence and quiet charm. But there was a sadness reflected in them that it pained me to see, once the great joy of her seeing me had died down. I reached my hand out to her in mute inquiry, my appetite appeased.

"What is it, beloved," I asked when she dropped her gaze, "that puts the grave light of sorrow in your eyes, when there should only be joy that we are reunited again?"

"You should well know," she responded. "It is the heavy yoke that the Miskovites have been to our people for ten years. They came but yesterday to exact their usual tribute—the best of our crops and three of our fairest maids. Oh, Dahrin, have you forgotten everything?"

She ended with a reproachful cry, for I had frowned blankly.

"Come," she cried then, "come with me out on the castle wall and I will explain what used to bring the flush of righteous rage to your face—before you left."

A STAIRCASE took us to a corridor that opened to the uppermost parts of the castle, and we strode to the abutment walls, looking out over the land from an archer's cubbyhole. Whether it was morning or afternoon I could not tell, for the sky was of the same uniform shrouded cast it had always been since I had known it. And as I turned my eyes in all directions, I saw nothing of the horizon, but only the uncanny ultramarine mists that seemed to rest on the land like a curse.

"What is this indigo mist, Alvena, that hangs so heavy over Jorentia?" I asked, sweeping my arm around.

"It is the evil sorcery of the Miskovites," she replied solemnly. "And it has blotted out the sun for ten long years. If

but your memory were not clouded, you would recall that this land was once a place of sunshine and peace and happiness."

"Something of that I *do* recall!" I said reflectively. "I seem to recall also that we were a populous race, spreading over a great kingdom, and that you, or someone like you, was our—our ruler!"

The princess looked at me strangely. "My mother!—she who was queen of Jorentia for seven years after my father, the king, died; and who herself departed this life when I was but a girl. Her untimely death was brought on by the falling of the magical curse of the Miskovites, which split our happy kingdom asunder, and—made us slaves!"

"Then you," I supplemented, "are queen of Jorentia, by right of heritage."

A hurt look came into Alvena's eyes. "I, who should be queen indeed, am no more than a princess for whom there is no throne. And you, Dahrin, who should become king, are but the lord of Castle Oppor, vassal deputy to the Miskovites."

Involuntary anger surged through me. "These Miskovites—tell me how they hold us in bondage."

"Oh, Dahrin, your poor mind!" Alvena sobbed. Then she took hold of herself and spoke tonelessly, bitterly:

"It was ten years ago that the Miskovites, failing in the attempt to conquer us in war, visited upon Jorentia an evil curse, produced by their black-souled sorcerers, for which they sold themselves to the devil. This ghastly blue pall, which has hidden the sun for a decade, descended upon us without warning. It not only has thinned our crops and thus brought famine to us so that our numbers have been halved, but it has also split the kingdom of Jorentia in twain. Beyond that thick blue wall of magic to the west"—she pointed to where the indigo mists were almost black in their intensity—"lie friends and loved ones whom we have not seen for ten years!"

"The barrier cannot be crossed?" I queried, incredulously.

"Those who try meet death," answered Alvena simply. "The black magic of the Miskovites is great. And then, our numbers depleted by starvation, our land bisected, the formerly weaker enemy poured upon us with its armies and conquered us. Doubtless the other half of our people have been also subjugated. At present we obey their dictates. From me they took the throne. From my people they take every season a third measure of our crops. Worst of all, they come once a month to pick out three of the fairest maids from the whole land. What evil fate visits them, we can only guess; they never come back from Miskovia. And to keep us weakened in strength, they take with them also as many of our strongest young men as they deem necessary—to become slaves, for soldiers they would not become for the hated Miskovites. That, Dahrin, is our tale of wo."

I burned with hot anger at the recital of atrocities practised by the tyrannical enemy. "Yes, I remember those things now, and I recall also that we staged a futile resistance once; there was much heroic fighting on our part; there was confusion——"

I hesitated, lost in vague doubt as to the rest, and the princess continued for me:

"And there was utter defeat for you and your brave men, Dahrin. I swooned away when I heard that you had all been killed; for not a week before we had made lovers' vows, you and I. Then I was brought before a bed, and there you lay, nearly dead from loss of blood. I nursed you tenderly, and with the help of Shorro-Kal's blessed magic, we fanned the spark of life yet left in you. Then it

was, after you had recovered, that Shorro-Kal suggested sending you on the Great Quest of Deliverance, more especially as the Miskovites wanted your head for your part in the rebellion."

"And then——?" I prompted.

"Why, then, Shorro-Kal weaved his necromantic spell over your body, and sent your spirit in search of the Deliverance."

The princess turned her large eyes upon me. "You have been gone three long years, beloved Dahrin. You have come back—not as you left!"

"Alvena, I do not know what you mean! I——"

But now the princess was staring horrified down on the landscape below. I followed her eye and saw a group of horsemen approaching the castle, having just emerged from the concealing blue fog to the west.

"The Miskovites!" gasped Alvena. "For what purpose can they be here, when but yesterday——"

My teeth clicked together involuntarily at sight of the hated enemy, and my right hand automatically darted for a sword-hilt that was not there. The party clattered up to the huge front portcullis, and I heard, a moment later, the screech of drawbridge chains.

I went mad then, it seemed, in an anger that had its roots in past memories. Hurling curses upon the Miskovites, I whirled from the bastion rampart and ran in furious rage toward the stairs that led below. Down these I fairly flew, only vaguely aware that the Princess Alvena was following me and begging me to stay and not run headlong into danger. All I knew at the moment was that the hated Miskovites were upon us, and that I wanted nothing more than to confront them and fight. Having gained the princess' chambers, I raced by instinct toward a doorway leading to the frontal part of the castle. Swinging it open savagely, I found myself face to face with Shorro-Kal, who, panting, had evidently at that moment arrived from the lower halls.

At sight of him I hesitated, and he read my purpose at a glance, by the livid fury in my face. Then I stepped forward, intending to brush past him, but his hand, with a surprizing strength for one so old and weak, clutched at my arm.

"Let me go, good Father," I fairly shouted. "I have business below."

"Nay, Prince Dahrin." His hand remained firm on my arm. "Below you must not go!"

Our eyes met, his sparkling strangely, and suddenly my madness left me, and I stepped back obediently. At the same moment the princess flew up and threw her arms around me.

"Dahrin, beloved. You would have walked to your death!" she panted, a look of mingled fear and relief in her eyes. Then she turned to Shorro-Kal:

"What have they come for this time?"

The old priest eyed me in silence for a moment. Then, reassured that I had full command of myself, he spoke:

"They have come—oh, the utter atrocity of it!—for ten more of our ablest-bodied youths!"

The Princess Alvena gasped and paled. Such was her tender heart, and her love for her people—a heritage from Jorentia's long line of beneficent monarchs—that the news hurt her as much as though they had been her own brothers or children.

"Tordok have mercy on us!" she cried despairingly. "When will this tyrannical yoke be lifted?"

As for myself, I think I growled in anger, so that Shorro-Kal again clutched my arm.

"Have no fear," I said then. "I will not do anything against your will. But I

feel I should be fighting the thrice-damned enemy, instead of moaning our fate up here in a woman's boudoir."

Shorro-Kal shook his head sadly. "You do not understand, brave Prince. The Miskovites are too many and too strong for us. Once before you and a band of courageous martyrs attempted to beat them back, with results you may, or may not, remember."

At my nod, he continued: "Remembering that, perhaps you also recall that, after long and careful deliberation, it was planned to try another way of ending the heart-breaking tyranny. Your spirit, under the influence of a powerful enchantment, was sent to another world——"

As the old priest paused mysteriously, I urged impatiently: "Go on, tell me all. Too long have you kept me in a fog of ignorance about the whole matter."

But the venerable magician, instead of answering directly, consulted a bit of parchment that he took from his robe. "Nay, my son. Time shortens, and you must now go back to that land in which your spirit has sojourned for so long. It is important that we keep the rapport between you and that other land intact. But when you next return, you will be told all."

The old priest then motioned the princess back, and in another moment was waving his curious wand before my face. Even as I turned to Alvena to say good-bye, a tenuous fog of spectrum blue—those indigos and ultramarines I knew so well — dissolved out of the air, and thickened rapidly. There was a long sensation of drifting in the shimmering veils of cerulean mists—or perhaps it was but an instant—and then——

Yes, back to my room in the big city, with incongruous tin-pan music drumming into my ears from the radio, and nothing more mysterious around me than worn furniture and calcimined walls.

This, the third of my eery "blue" dreams, each a continuation of the former like the chapters of a book, has placed my mind in a quandary. It is but a dream. I have told myself that a hundred times. What else could it be? Surely it is nonsense to suppose that the events I seemed to go through were actual—in another world!

The first two times I dreamed of Jorentia, I was able to scoff lightly at their significance, despite the uncanny vividness with which the dreams visited me. But now . . . [deletion.—EANDO.]

AUGUST 22nd—It is but two nights ago that I stared at the hypnotic sapphire in my fob and found myself transported to Castle Oppor, either in a dream or—not in a dream. Last evening I came home from the office worn in spirit and body. It was miserable, trying to do my work, with my every thought revolving around Castle Oppor and everything in it. Yet—despite what I might call a craving to try again the experiment with the sapphire—I resisted, and went to a sleepless bed instead. Today was still more ragged, so that even my fellow workers noticed it and told me to take an afternoon off, as I was obviously ill.

Tonight, all resolves shattered, I again fastened my eyes to the queer bubbles in the crystal heart of the sapphire. That was two hours ago.

Awakening after another of those mysterious transitions through azure clouds, I found myself in that curious state of being two persons—and yet one. In Jorentia, I had, it seemed, the full memory of George Borland, but my action and thought were primarily under the dominance of that mysterious Prince Dahrin,

with whom I was somehow closely associated.

But this fourth revival in that other land was not as the first three had been, for I opened my eyes upon walls I immediately knew to be those of Castle Oppor's lowermost chambers. Furthermore, I awoke with my mind and memory wholly cleared so that I remembered without any obscuring my entire previous life as a prince of Jorentia. Only one thing remained hazy to my understanding — the strange journey which my spirit had undertaken to an alien world.

With my new-found cognizance, I immediately recognized the room in which I lay as part of the private chambers of Shorro-Kal, the last and greatest of Jorentia's magicians. Situated in what had been dungeons in ages past, these gloomy spaces were now the scene of the exorcism and necromantic rites of Shorro-Kal, whose art was the magic lore of Jorentia's many powerful sorcerers of the past.

I turned my head when the last wisps of blueness had cleared away, and saw the priest of magic seated before a huge desk, thumbing gravely through one of many ancient books of thaumaturgic lore piled thereon. Some sixth sense seemed to tell him I was conscious, and he turned to me with a bow and the deferential salute that he had always used to me.

"You have returned quickly, noble Prince, from the other world," were his first words.

I smiled. "At your bidding, of course."

"Nay," returned the aged magician, to my astonishment. "I could send you at will to the other world, but calling you back—that was not within my power. It rested solely with the will of that being with whom you were identified."

"You mean that it rested with that other—with my own—with my other—oh, Shorro-Kal, I am bewitched! You say that other person sent me back at will, and yet I *am* that other person!"

The venerable savant of sorcery nodded sagely. "Small wonder that you feel you are still enthralled in magic, for you have become so closely identified with the mind in that other world that truly perhaps you *are* one!"

"What do you mean?" I begged, standing up from my couch. "Three times I have been there to that other world and back, and yet I know but vaguely the why and wherefore of it."

"You shall know, my son," soothed Shorro-Kal. "Have patience for a while yet. First of all, Prince Dahrin, you must tell me all that you remember of that other world, and all you can of that other being whom you feel to be yourself. Then, and then only, can I make clear to you the entire story of this, my greatest feat in the ancient profession of magic."

I puzzled in thought for a moment, and then began:

"In that other life I was—or am—named George Borland. He is a youth of perhaps my age, but far punier in body and meeker of heart. He lives—or I live there—in a great city of stupendous structures which tower ten times the height of Castle Oppor."

I paused, and then went on, giving a picture of the world of George Borland, drawing from a well of memory that seemed my own, and yet not my own. Finally Shorro-Kal, who listened attentively, interrupted and asked a few leading questions that brought out in broad detail the life of George Borland. It came at last to the mention of the sapphire and how through its inexplicable influence I had transported myself from that world to Jorentia. At this point the old priest's face became a picture of great interest; he hung on my words as though

they were the distilled essence of eternal wisdom.

Then I had told all I could, and fell silent, staring at the fervent concentration displayed on my companion's bearded visage.

SHORRO-KAL remained in this state for long minutes, till I thought he had perhaps cast a spell about himself and sent his spirit to some forgotten outland. I squirmed fretfully, for I had never been the kind to spend time in idle waiting, and was about to touch his arm when his eyes came suddenly to life.

And he spoke: "You say this gem which had seemed to enmesh you in dreams was blue in color?"

I nodded. "A beautiful iridescent blue, which exhibits every tone and shade of that color, in various kinds of light."

Shorro-Kal stroked his beard thoughtfully: "And when the spell of the blue-stone was upon you, you seemed to drift in strata of blueness, shade after shade, till of a sudden you were here in Jorentia?"

I nodded again.

"Picture the scene which you saw from the ramparts of Castle Oppor with Alvena," said the aged man then, with a tense note in his voice. "Was there anything in that color to—remind you of the stone?"

I started in surprize. "Yes! Yes! It strikes me now at your mention of it. Those obscuring mists which roll over Jorentia and hide the light of the blessed sun, and form also a wall that bisects our kingdom, have the nature and quality of the blue-stone's radiance! I would swear it!"

At this Shorro-Kal heaved a long sigh and turned his eyes heavenward as though thanking Tordok for some great favor. Then he trembled like a leaf and would have fallen if I had not sprung to his aid. I carried him to the couch, alarmed at the sudden pallor that overspread his withered cheeks. But he pushed me away as I started to rub his wrists, and his color returned.

"It is nothing, Prince Dahrin. My old bones are but feeling their age."

I could not know, but I felt it was more than just that.

Then Shorro-Kal turned his oddly luminous eyes on me. "Prince Dahrin—or George Borland, as you are also known—you shall now hear as much as it is possible for you to understand of the mysterious spell which sent your spirit—your soul-mind—to another world on a strange quest."

He folded his robe carefully, and I waited with caught breath, for the mystery of it had me deeply interested.

"Know then," began Shorro-Kal, "that when I perceived the Miskovites had broken our power with a great and evil magic, and when I saw how impossible it was for even such a great fighter and leader as yourself to drive them out of our fair land, I decided that only in one way could the scourge be lifted—magic must be fought with magic!

"Thereupon I girded my supernatural powers and exorcised from nadirs of the universe certain benign spirits, and communed with them. Through their kindly aid, I was shown a way to combat the hideous sorcery of the Miskovites, for these spirits hated those leagued with our enemy. Yet it was not to be easy.

"The black magic of the Miskovites is very powerful. The sorcery I had at my command was hardly able to cope with theirs. But the one way was there for my use, providing I was willing to risk not only my own life and soul, but the soul of another—yourself! For only a strong-spirited man, good and pure in thought

and deed, would suffice for my purpose, and in all the land of Jorentia, none could be more fit for the part than yourself. I risked your soul to a horrible fate, in the event of failure, my son, because I placed the welfare and future well-being of Jorentia even above you—or myself."

He paused; then: "We have met with success, my son, for which thank Tordok. But I greatly fear that the price will be paid after all——"

I glanced up, startled.

"You are safe," he pursued, "but myself, and one other—it rests between us, or perhaps jointly upon us."

I ATTEMPTED to elicit further information on the matter, but Shorro-Kal shook his head:

"Let that be; it concerns directly neither you nor Jorentia. To continue—I having made my plans, and acquainted you with them, you readily agreed, thinking, perhaps, that the spell I was to weave would make possible your carrying on a successful war against the Miskovites. It was just three years ago that the Princess Alvena bade you a tearful, but brave, good-bye—she being fully in accord with my scheme—and I took you from her and conducted you down here to my chambers."

I nodded eagerly, remembering vividly that last hour of life—that tender caress from Alvena, the beautiful Alvena whom I loved dearer than life, and who less than a month before that had promised to become my bride upon my safe return.

"For three days and nights I labored," went on the old priest. "I called upon my most terrific powers of magic, and sent you into a deep trance. Then, the enchantment completed, I transported your stiffened body to the crypts of the executioners, knowing it would there be unmolested by enemy or friend alike, as none dares defy the ghosts that wander there.

"There lay your body, Prince Dahrin, but your spirit—ah, it wandered afar indeed! Where—I myself cannot know that. But I had bidden it search—if need be to the ends of the universe—for the Secret of Deliverance for Jorentia. Under the compelling command of my sorcery, your consciousness—your *soul* in very fact—plunged into the abysses of unnumbered worlds, searching, ever searching. And there lay the great danger: that your soul, never reaching its goal, would wander for ever—and never return to bring to life your sleeping body once again!"

I shuddered, and at the same time felt glad that I had not known those things *before* I had been sent on the ghostly mission.

"But your soul was strong, my son, strong and relentless in its search, and it finally came upon its goal. That goal was in the world in which you lived as George Borland. Thereupon, through what processes I cannot make clear to you, your soul fastened itself in proximity to the goal which it had found—and that was the first of George Borland's strange 'dreams'. Somehow—even to myself it is not fully clear—your soul identified itself with that of George Borland's, and as one with him, you dwelt in that land for a short space of time."

"But where *is* that land?" I queried as the old priest paused. "Surely it must lie in some remote corner of this world. Yet it cannot be, for from what I know through my identity with George Borland, they knew no such land as this—Jorentia."

"Try not to fathom that, my son," answered Shorro-Kal solemnly. "It is not of this world, nor of any world your mind can conceive. Despite your rapport with

George Borland, your respective material worlds are separated by impassable gulfs of dimensions—inconceivable distances—impenetrable veils of time!"

I shrugged the problem away willingly enough, and waited for the magician to go on.

"Through the medium of what to George Borland was dream-stuff, your soul, still bent on its mission, came back to Jorentia, carrying with it the soul of that other being, for you two had become inextricably entwined in identity.

"Imagine my great joy—it could have been no less than the joy of your beloved Princess when she heard—as I paid my daily visit to the crypt in which your body lay, to find it lying outside by the road. I knew immediately your spirit had returned, and I stayed there constantly, after bringing you once again inside, hoping and praying that nothing had gone amiss.

"Of course, we now know all has gone well. You are safely returned, and with you the Great Secret of Deliverance for which I sent you to search the universes."

"What then is the Great Secret?" I asked, trembling.

"This," and his voice became grave—portentous. "The master magicians of Miskovia had locked the evil blue mist over Jorentia, and split it in twain, *and they had placed the key to its unlocking in that other world,* fully content that it was out of my reach, for well they knew that I was also a powerful sorcerer. Any puny and inadequate spell I would have dissolved in a trice. Ah, it was a master move! And well-nigh it proved beyond my reach!"

For a moment Shorro-Kal expanded in a sudden mood of exultance, and I said nothing, for he fully deserved an instant of self-elation and triumph. But the aged priest was not the one to lose himself in such vain thoughts for long. He went on:

"The key"—now his voice fell to a whisper, and he glanced about as though fearing eavesdroppers—"the key to the evil curse of the blue fog which clouds Jorentia *is nothing more than that sapphire which George Borland possesses!*"

I sat stunned. Then I heard Shorro-Kal's voice again, fraught with excitement. "You must make one more journey back to that alien world where you live as George Borland. One more and it will be the last, *for with the smashing of the sapphire, the evil spell of blueness will dissolve from our skies!* And you and George Borland will separate, never to meet again!"

I REMEMBER little more, beyond the fact that Shorro-Kal led me to the chambers of the Princess, and left us alone for a while so that we might caress each other and rejoice together over the coming deliverance of our loved land. Then I was back with Shorro-Kal in his gloomy caverns, and he smiled encouragingly upon me as he waved the wand before my face. There was a swirling of indigo mist, hazes of ethereal ultramarine, and then——

I was staring at the sapphire in my hand—I, George Borland.

I have the sapphire before me now as I write. It glints oddly in the lamplight: it seems to twinkle with weighty secrets. Is it just a sapphire, a mineral with some tinsel value, as anybody I'd ask would hasten to assure me without question? Is it merely a colored bit of stone which has hypnotized me into a species of dream? Is it nothing but a speck from Nature's furnaces, about which and under the influence of which, I have deluded myself into believing I have traversed strange

dimensions to an utterly alien, yet incredibly earth-like, world?

Or is it more than that?

[End of diary excerpts.—EANDO.]

* * * * * * *

INSIDE the sealed envelope containing the above writing was a smaller envelope, which I did not notice till I had read the manuscript. Then my eye fell on the object and I carefully sliced it open with my pen-knife. Tipping it to see what could be inside, I dropped it suddenly with an involuntary cry.

With the sound of dried peas in a gourd, a stream of roughly ground bits of blue stone scattered over the table top!

Beyond Death's Gateway

By PAUL ERNST

An utterly strange story about the world's weirdest criminal, who calls himself Doctor Satan, and his amazing journey through the door of death

THE sea was as calm as a pond. Over it the great ship floated like a ghost vessel, dipping a little to long, slow swells but otherwise as motionless as a thing on a backdrop. The white moon poured down its peaceful flood, but somehow the peace was an eery thing and not reassuring.

In a large cabin on deck A, two men sat behind a locked door and talked in whispers too low to be recorded if there were a dictograph receiver concealed anywhere. One of the two had the often-photographed face of Assistant Secretary of War Harley. The other was Jules Marxman, inventor and manufacturer.

Harley, a slim, precise, elderly man who looked more like a high school principal than an important Government official, shook his head a little.

"Then, as the invention now stands, it is useless," he summed up.

Marxman, the inventor, nodded his bushy gray head. His heavy, grizzled brows drew into a straight line.

"Useless," he conceded. "I have the formula for the poison gas completed. It is perfect—a gas so volatile that it spreads at a rate of a hundred feet a second in all directions, and wipes out all living things, including vegetable matter. But its very speed makes it impossible to use it as other war gases are used. It would wipe out the men releasing it as well as the enemy."

"Special masks to protect our own men?" suggested the Assistant Secretary of War.

Marxman shook his head.

"I thought of that, of course. I worked along that angle for a time. But no mask can be devised to protect a man from the gas. So the answer lies in another direction. That is, an antidote of some sort for it that will permit the men releasing it to feel no ill effects from it."

"That sounds difficult. Look here, couldn't the stuff be shot from guns to explode and radiate at a distance?"

"No. It is so highly explosive itself

"The hand drove for Doctor Satan's throat, and found it."

that no shell can be designed to keep it from exploding when the gun charge bursts, when its high volatility spreads it all around the gun. Again, our own men would die from it. No, the only answer is the antidote that will make the corps releasing it immune to its deadly effects."

Harley stroked his long, spare chin.

"You've worked along that line, Marxman?"

"Yes. I have been working on an antidote for eighteen months. The final solution is not yet worked out. But I'm getting close."

Marxman looked at the locked cabin door, and lowered his voice still more.

"I have an antidote at present that will counteract the effects of the gas. But its own effects are almost as serious: The man who takes it literally dies for a short space of time. His heart and breathing stop. Blood circulation ceases. He's a dead man—for about twelve hours. Most curious."

"And most unfortunate," Harley said dryly. "In twelve hours the enemy from beyond the radius of the spreading gas could gun and bomb the helpless crew out of existence. But tell me, how can men 'die' for twelve hours, with the blood stream stilled and liable to coagulate, and then come to life again? Or—do they?"

"Yes, they do. I don't yet know how. The blood should coagulate, but it doesn't. Perhaps some life force beyond power of detection still functions enough to keep the body in shape to be reanimated when the effect of the antidote wears off. Anyhow, that's what happens to a man who takes it in its present state. He literally dies for half a day, then comes slowly back to life again."

"Have you tried it on anyone?"

Marxman nodded. His face was a little paler than normal.

"What happens to the subject of experiment?"

MARXMAN looked at Harley for a moment before replying.

"I tried it on a dock laborer, several times. He wasn't a clever or educated man. He didn't manage to express very well the things that happened to him. But as far as I could gather, he was in the land of the dead during the coma induced by the drug."

"Land of the dead!" Harley exclaimed. Then he smiled. "And where is that?"

"I don't know."

"What's it like?"

"I don't know that, either. My man hadn't the vocabulary to describe such things in the first place. In the second, he didn't want to talk! And, though he was fearless in a blunt, animal way, he refused to take the stuff more than twice."

"Probably it has some sort of hashish effect," said Harley, shrugging. "'Land of the dead!' That's a little thick! But regardless of that angle of it—the poison gas invention is not yet ready to turn over to the war department. Is that it?"

"That's it," said Marxman. "The gas is perfected, but the antidote is not. And until it is, the whole thing remains only a novelty, a dream of empire that can't be crystallized till I have finished work."

Harley fingered his lean chin.

"Don't overlook the fact that, even as matters stand, you have a very valuable secret," he warned. "Any power on earth would pay millions for the uncompleted formulæ, on the chance that they could work out the conclusion in their laboratories. You have the formulæ written out?"

Marxman nodded.

"They're too complicated to carry in my head."

"You keep the papers in a safe place?"

Marxman smiled a little. He drew from his vest pocket a small capsule, like a quinine capsule. It looked like some sort of dyspepsia medicine he carried for use after meals.

"The formulæ are on onion-skin paper, in this capsule. If ever I am threatened for them, I swallow them. The capsule dissolves in my stomach—and so do the formulæ! I hope the necessity for swallowing them doesn't arise, for it would take me six wasted months to rediscover a few of the obscure chemical combinations in the formulæ. But it can be done if necessary."

Harley nodded. "As safe a way as any, I think. Well, good-night, Marxman. Take care of yourself, and for God's sake give the United States first chance at your gas and antidote when it's worked out."

"I am American," was Marxman's simple answer. "I have worked in France because a colleague there has just the laboratory equipment I needed. That's all. My own country gets the invention

when it is completed, as a matter of course."

The two men shook hands. Harley left Marxman's cabin.

MARXMAN stared at the little capsule in his hand, which contained the nucleus of the mightiest war weapon ever devised. Then he slipped it into his vest pocket again.

The night was warm, almost stuffy. He lit a cigar, put on a plaid cap, and went up on deck. . . .

At that moment, in the salon at the opposite end of the ship, from which he had not stirred all evening, a man who looked like a high school principal but was really Assistant Secretary of War Harley, was talking in low tones with his secretary, a good-looking young fellow of twenty-eight.

"I hear Marxman is on board with an interesting invention," the secretary was saying. "Are you going to see him?"

"By all means," said Harley. "I think a little later in the evening. . . ."

Marxman passed the windows of the salon without looking in. Assistant Secretary of War Harley had already seen him, he thought. It never occurred to him that a man could make up like Harley so exactly as to fool him—he was well acquainted with the man—and then proceed to pump him dry of details concerning his latest invention.

He walked to the rail, fingers touching the capsule in his vest pocket.

SEA calm as a pond. Great ship like a ghost vessel floating over it. Moon pouring down a peaceful but somehow eery white flood.

From the stern came strains of music as the ship's orchestra played for those in evening dress who cared to dance. From the salon nearest to where Marxman stood by the rail came a burst of laughter as members of a salesmen's convention to Europe laughed over a joke.

Right behind Marxman there was an iron staircase leading up to the boat deck. From that deserted upper deck a figure appeared. It blotted out the faint light at the head of the stairs. It began to descend, slowly, without a sound, like a great snake slithering down on its prey.

Once Marxman turned for a moment. The black figure became a motionless blot on the staircase. Marxman looked out over the sea again. Then the figure recommenced its crawling descent. A faint streak of light from the drawn shutters of a near-by cabin flicked over it.

It revealed a form in a black cloak with a black hat pulled low. That was all. The face could not be seen. Yet evil radiated from the form as heat radiates from black-hot iron..

The black figure reached the deck and took two rapid strides toward the inventor. . . .

Gay laughter from the salon—casual music from the dance floor—and on the deck, death!

Marxman tried to cry out. A steely arm hooked around his throat prevented a whisper from coming from his lips. His hand darted for his vest pocket and he raised the capsule to his lips and took it into his mouth.

The arm around his throat was replaced by steely hands. He couldn't swallow. His face grew blue, purple, with eyes starting from their sockets as he fought for breath. Then his writhing body became still. It hung from the iron grip of the hands around his throat.

One of the hands shifted. Fingers, gloved, pried open Marxman's jaws. They took the melting capsule from his mouth. Then the dark figure heaved upright.

A thing like a badly tied bundle of rugs went over the ship's rail. There was

a faint splash, almost inaudible in the plashing of the ship's progress.

The dark figure watched Marxman's body float astern like a drift log in the white wake of the moonlight. Then it turned, and melted into the darkness of the nearest companionway. And with it went the formulae of the new gas—and its partly perfected antidote.

2

On a hill fronting the shore of the bay among great estates forming the cream of the big houses in the wealthy resort town of Red Bank, New Jersey, was the home of Linton R. Yates. A thirty-room mansion, it crowned the hill like a coronet of gray, cut stone.

At the moment it was dark. No lights showed from any window, even the windows in the servants' quarters. It looked empty. But it wasn't. In the darkness of the side driveway a roadster stood. The roadster had been driven there, alone, by Linton Yates himself. And Linton Yates was at present in the basement of the house.

Down there, with none of the electric light showing from any barred and steel-shuttered basement window, he stood beside the square furnace at the end wall. His withered old hand went out. He touched a small discolored patch in the wall next to the back of the furnace. A section of the wall hinged out.

Gray-bearded, wizened, crafty-looking, the rich man stared furtively around him before he stepped into the hidden basement room revealed by the swinging back of the concealed door. As he entered the room he touched another discolored patch in the stone wall, and the door closed after him.

There was a great safe door in the floor of the ten-by-ten cube. So large was it that it almost formed the floor of the room. Rubbing his hands together with a dry, rasping sound, Yates walked over the safe door to a big knob in its center. He twirled that to the required combination, walked off the door, and threw a small switch.

There was a hum as a half-horsepower electric motor spun gears that slowly raised the ponderous door. Yates went down two steps into the safe. Here was a great heap of small, dirty yellow bars, and a square steel box. The yellow bars were gold; tons of the stuff, hoarded here by Yates against the day when the country would return to the gold standard—at a new and high dollar-value that should give him two dollars for every one he had spent for the precious metal. The steel box. . . .

Yates chuckled aloud as he passed the bars of gold and went to the box. It weighed perhaps a hundred pounds. It was with a panting effort that the wizened old man managed to open the lid. With the lid opened, he crooned aloud, as a man might talk to an adored pet.

A coruscating, varicolored fire came from within the box. It was cold fire. Yates plunged his hands in and lifted them. The fire trickled back down between his fingers and into the box again. The fire of diamonds, hundreds of them, unset but perfectly cut.

Diamonds and gold! The two commodities, particularly gold, that always have at least some solid worth, no matter to what low price levels other commodities sink.

"With these," whispered Yates, eyes gleaming, "I am secure. No man or form of government can harm me—make me poor."

He let diamonds trickle through his claw-like fingers again, then stiffened suddenly.

But his stiffening was not that of alarm, nor was it that of listening. He stared straight ahead of him, at the steel

and copper wall of the sunken safe. But he did not see that wall. His filmed eyes were glazing rapidly, as the eyes of a man glaze in death. His body was as stiff, suddenly, and for no apparent reason, as a thing of wood.

For perhaps a full minute he stood there, bent over the box a little, with the last of the diamonds trickling from his cupped hands to the strong-box. Then, slowly, he began to sag toward the floor. He sank to his knees, his rigid stare still centered on the safe wall. He fell, like a falling log, prone beside the treasure box.

He was dead. A glance could reveal that fact. But in a moment it was revealed that his death was not the most horrible part of the unseen drama to be played in the sunken safe.

The dead body abruptly began to lose its solidarity of outline. Its demarcations became blurred, as the surface of hot stone is blurred when heat waves shimmer up from it. And as the outlines became more and more blurred, they commenced to dwindle.

The dead body shrank, like wool in hot water. It got smaller and smaller, till it was like the form of a doll dressed in doll's clothes to resemble an old man. And then—there was nothing in the safe but the dirty bars of gold and the small box of gems. At least, a glance would have intimated that there was nothing. Only a careful look would have shown, on the floor beside the box, a tiny thing like a watch-charm shaped in human form.

That was at eleven-thirty at night. At twelve, a big closed car drew up behind Yates' roadster under the side portico. The closed car had come thirty miles in thirty minutes. From it descended a figure cloaked in black, with a black hat on its head the brim of which hid all trace of its features.

The figure worked an instant with the lock of the side door, opened it, and walked in darkness to the basement stairs. Beside the furnace a gloved hand—gloved in red instead of in more conventional hue—went out and touched the discolored patch.

Leisurely the figure went into the hidden basement room. It lifted the box of gems first. The box was borne to the big closed car. Then, bar by bar, the gold followed, carried by the dark figure as though the two hundred and fifty pounds each weighed were scarcely more than a normal load.

With plenty of time between trips, the big car was loaded till it sagged drunkenly low on its springs. Then it was backed out of the drive under the red-gloved hands of the dark form at the wheel.

It slid soundlessly into the main road, turned, and took the wide pike toward New York City. . . .

It was at three in the morning when the Red Bank chief of police, a dark-faced, slow-moving man named Carlisle who was high in New York's detective bureau, and a man with black hair and steel-gray eyes, entered the sunken safe in the hidden basement room.

"See?" said the Red Bank chief. "It's all like I phoned you, Carlisle. Yates' roadster is at the side door, lights out and motor cold. The cook next door reported seeing the old man drive in, and after he'd been in the place two hours, with no lights on, she had sense enough to think something funny was going on, and phone me. But I get here and find this safe open and empty, and no sign of Yates! Now where the hell is he? He ain't in the house, and he ain't on the grounds. He couldn't have gone far without his roadster. And anyhow, his safe's cleaned. It must have had some-

thing pretty valuable in it. He certainly didn't clean it out himself and then just walk away somewhere leaving it wide open!"

The tall man with the coal-black hair and the gray eyes stooped suddenly. He picked up something from the floor, near a square in the dust that looked as though a box had rested there recently.

"What'd you find, Keane?" Carlisle asked.

Ascott Keane, probably the most competent detective alive, though few knew him as anything but a polo-playing rich man's son, faced Lieutenant Detective Carlisle.

"Nothing but a burnt match," he said, holding out a paper match with a charred end. "I don't think it will tell us much."

He gave the charred match to Carlisle.

But into his coat pocket went another small object, hardly bigger than the match, which he had picked up from the floor at the same time and palmed.

Carlisle grunted at the match, then looked expectantly at Ascott Keane.

"Well," he said, "you once told me to get in touch with you any time an especially mysterious crime was done. This is crime, sure enough. And damned if it isn't mysterious enough. Think your pal, Doctor Satan, did it?"

Keane shrugged.

"There undoubtedly was something of great value in this carefully concealed strong-room. There must have been a great deal of it. Probably hoarded gold. Certainly Yates wasn't able to carry it away: he was an old man, rather feeble. *Somebody* got rid of him, somehow, when he was down here counting over his buried treasure, and then carried off the treasure! And from the complete absence of all clues I'd say the person clever enough to do that might have been —Doctor Satan."

Carlisle stared curiously at Keane. Keane's face was as calm as a poker-player's. But it was to be noted that fine beads of perspiration were on his forehead, and that his cheeks were not quite as calm as his expression. Hard muscle ridged them.

"That all you got to tell me?" he said.

"That's all for the moment. I think I'll run along——"

"But you just came!" Carlisle said, disappointed and a little suspicious. "You haven't looked around at all."

"Looking around won't get you anywhere—if this *is* the work of Doctor Satan. And I'm sure it is. A lot of quiet study in a secluded spot is more to the point. I'm off to indulge myself in that now."

He nodded to the two men, and left the basement.

BEHIND Yates' car was the police car the Chief and Carlisle had come in. Behind that was Keane's long, low-hooded sedan with its streamlines and its hundred and thirty miles an hour of speed under its hood.

Beside the driver's seat was a girl, waiting for him. She was tall and lithe. Her dark blue eyes, in the light from the dash, softened as they turned on him. Her hair, escaping in a few tendrils from under a smart, small hat, was coppery brown. This was Beatrice Dale, Keane's secretary. No, more than secretary! She was his able assistant, his right-hand man. More than once in his pursuit of the monster of crime who called himself Doctor Satan, Keane had reached the point where he could hardly have carried on without her aid.

"What did you find?" she said eagerly, as he took the seat beside her and started the motor. "Was it — Doctor Satan's work?"

Wordlessly, in answer, Keane handed her the small thing he'd picked up from

the floor of the rifled strong-room. Then he slid into reverse gear as she looked at it.

"Ascott, what is it?" Beatrice said. "It looks like a tiny doll. Yet it gives me the creeps somehow. It seems to be made of rubber or some such stuff. A little doll, hardly more than half an inch long. What is it?"

Keane tooled the car onto the highway and started along the New York pike. He glanced somberly at her.

"What is it? Well, it isn't a doll. Here, give it back to me before I tell you."

He took it from her fingers and put it back into his pocket.

"That," he said, "is a man. Not a doll. A dead man!"

"What——" Beatrice faltered.

"It's the remains of Linton R. Yates. Now, you're not going to faint! I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you were apt to do anything silly."

Beatrice Dale straightened her swaying body in the seat. She drew a deep breath, and her voice was measurably calm as she said:

"You flatter my nerves, I'm afraid. My God! A dead man! And I held it!"

It was notable that she didn't question for an instant the statement that a thing like a tiny doll, which could be held in the palm of her hand, was, impossibly, a dead body. She had worked with Keane long enough to know that his statements were apt to be infallible. And the *feel* of the little thing that "had given her the creeps" bore out his fantastic declaration.

"Yes," he said as the car leaped toward eighty miles an hour, "that little thing is Linton Yates, retired oil magnate. Can you imagine his loving family gathered around that, during a burial ceremony? Like burying a watch-charm with all due pomp and surroundings!"

"Then it *was* Doctor Satan! Nobody else on earth could have done so hideous and bizarre a thing! But how——"

She stared at him, still pale, eyes wide.

Keane frowned at the night, into which they were boring at express train speed.

"I think I know how. I'll make sure when we've got to my library at home."

THAT was at a little after three. At four, they stood in Keane's book-lined library beside the great ebony desk at which he had sat studying so many problems arising from the ghastly genius of Doctor Satan.

Keane was reading a two-year-old scientific paper entitled *The Possibilities of a Death, or Disintegrating, Ray,* by someone named Bernard Hallowell:

"The death ray, so-called from popular speculations of a disintegrating device by the public press, is not at all an impossible dream. I am working on some such device now. I have come close to its solution several times. As none of the features of my invention has yet been perfected to the point where they can be patented, I will naturally not reveal particulars to you. But I can describe the result of the machine when—and if—it is completed.

"My apparatus could be pointed and aimed as accurately as any gun, so that the ray it emits can kill one person, and one person alone, at a distance up to forty miles. Or the ray could be so diffused that all things within a forty-degree arc of its muzzle (at a lesser distance, however) would die. The ray strikes instantly dead the thing it is loosed upon. Then it further disintegrates the flesh of the carcass by causing the molecules to split apart and stream away, through solid objects around it, and eventually into empty space. How can I know this, when I have never yet quite

completed a machine? My only answer, unfortunately not provable since I cannot let anyone see the fruits of my experiments to date, is that I have come near enough to the solution of the problem to watch an effect, similar to what I describe, begin on bodies of animals in my laboratory. . . ."

Keane closed the paper, and looked at Beatrice.

Her blue eyes were level with concentration. She stared at the paper in his hand, then at his face.

"Doctor Satan got to the man who wrote that paper, Bernard Hallowell," she said. "Since he wrote it, he has completed the death-ray machine. Doctor Satan forced the secret of it from him. That is what the little figure you picked up in Yates' safe means."

Keane slowly shook his head. On his forehead again appeared fine drops of sweat. And again hard muscle ridged out on his lean cheeks.

"No, Beatrice. It means more than that—much more. You see, Bernard Hallowell is dead. He died two years ago, just after reading this paper before a meeting of the American Scientific Institute."

Beatrice stared at him, color slowly draining from her face as she vaguely sensed something of what was in his mind.

"Bernard Hallowell, the one man on earth capable of doing to a human body what was done to Yates, is dead. Yet Doctor Satan got from him the secret of the death ray—which was not quite completed when he died. That can mean only one thing:

"Doctor Satan has found out how really to do that which charlatans and self-deluded investigators have often claimed baselessly they could do—communicate with the dead."

3

The disappearance on shipboard of the great inventor, Jules Marxman, stirred police circles as a stick stirs muddy water. The vanishing of Linton Yates was distinctly secondary: Yates, though far richer, was not as internationally known.

At the hotel suite booked by Marxman for himself and his assistant, swarms of detectives and newspaper reporters filed in and out interviewing, or trying to interview, Slycher, the assistant.

But there was one man who had no trouble closeting himself with Slycher. Known to police and news hawks if not to the public, he was treated with amazing deference. That was Ascott Keane. He sat in the tower suite now with Slycher.

"You say you thought Assistant Secretary of War Harley talked to Marxman just before Marxman disappeared?" Keane repeated.

Slycher nodded, white-faced, more than a little frightened. He was himself a murder suspect, of course.

"But Harley denies seeing Marxman?" Keane went on.

"Yes," said Slycher. "Most of the police think I'm making up the story. But I swear I saw Mr. Harley go into Mr. Marxman's cabin. Also, I saw him come out again, and shortly afterward Mr. Marxman went on deck—and was never seen again."

Keane looked at the man. He was obviously telling the truth as he saw it.

"Harley is above suspicion," Keane mused. "If he denies he was in Marxman's cabin, it's quite likely he wasn't there, in spite of appearances. That means someone must have impersonated Harley. Marxman was bringing home a nearly completed war formula, wasn't he?"

Slycher nodded and told him about the poison gas, which was perfected, and the antidote which was not.

"The gas was useless as a weapon till the antidote could be worked out better," he concluded. "So anyone stealing the gas formula couldn't use it anyhow: if he tried, he'd be knocked out himself."

Keane's eyes were intent, and were glinting a little as they always did when he was uncovering a warm scent.

"This formula of the antidote," he said slowly. "As it stood, it figuratively killed anyone who took it——"

"Not figuratively—actually!" the inventor's assistant interrupted. "Anyone taking it dies, as far as medical examinations can show, for twelve hours."

"And Doctor Satan can communicate with the dead!" Keane breathed.

"What?"

"Nothing. I think I'm beginning to see light, that's all. And now for a very important question. And you'll have to judge for yourself, from recommendations given you concerning me, whether you dare answer truly. Did Marxman, by any chance, have a sample of the antidote among his effects?"

Slycher hesitated a long time before he answered that. Then slowly he nodded.

"He did. He dared to do it because the formula was so complicated that he doubted if any laboratory could fully analyze the sample and duplicate it."

"Let me have it, will you?" said Keane.

Again the assistant studied his face for quite a time. But Keane's sincerity and authority were unquestionable. Slycher got up and went to the next room of the suite. He came back with a heavily sealed envelope in his hand. The envelope was padded out as though it contained a handkerchief or some other small but bulky thing.

"Here it is. Do you want all of it?"

"No," said Keane softly, "just enough for one dose."

Slycher opened the envelope. Onto a sheet of writing-paper he shook a minute quantity of purplish powder. It was coarse powder, small crystals, really. It looked like powdered amethyst.

"This is one dose of the antidote," he said. "May I ask what you intend to do with it?"

Keane looked at, and through, the man. His voice, when he answered, was a little hushed.

"I'm going to take it—and die. I'm going to find out where a man goes when he's dead. And I hope to meet another person in that place—and perhaps leave him there!"

Beatrice Dale, to whom he announced the same intention, when he returned home, was horrified.

"My God, Ascott! Meet Doctor Satan in death! You can't! The risk——"

"The risk is a little thing compared to what may happen if I don't," Keane said quietly. "Have you thought at all what this means? Doctor Satan, with the aid of Marxman's uncompleted formula, can visit the dead. From them he can obtain the secrets they died without revealing to any other mortal. Why, the world is his if he can't be stopped! Think of being able to discover the last, and perhaps greatest of the inventions Edison was working on when he died! Or the chance of learning from Captain Kidd's own lips where his treasure is hidden! Or of finding out the true political machinations of European diplomacy from any of the great statesmen who have recently passed on! Satan can be emperor of earth with that knowledge!"

He looked at the pinch of purplish crystals.

"The gateway to death. Bring me a glass of water, will you? Even if nothing is accomplished beyond that gateway,

even if I never come back from beyond it, it will be interesting to pass through it."

MIDWAY between New York and Red Bank, in New Jersey, on a flat-topped knoll near the sea, there stands a rather hideous replica of a Rhenish castle built by an eccentric rich man long dead. The people living near there call it Furlowe's folly, and know that it has been untenanted and in bad repair for many years. What they did not know was that it had been purchased recently by a man who never made a personal appearance during the transaction. What they also did not know was that in a steel-lined room in the basement the purchaser, and his ugly assistant, often engaged at night in occupations that would have blanched their faces could they have looked on.

The two were there tonight.

One, the secret purchaser of Furlowe's Folly, was Doctor Satan, dressed in the masquerade it amused him to wear: red cloak covering his lean, powerful body from heels to throat; red mask over his face; red gloves on his hands; and on his head the skull-cap of red with the little projections, like horns, that completed his costume of Lucifer.

The other was Bostiff, who was like a figure out of an illustration of Dante's *Inferno*. He had no legs. He hitched his gigantic, formidably muscled torso about by using his arms as legs and resting his weight on the calloused backs of his hands. His eyes, dull, dog-like, stupidly brutal, followed the red-clad figure of his master constantly.

Doctor Satan was bending over a long, plain table which was littered with laboratory instruments. He was manipulating a small glass beaker in which a purplish, heavy liquid was rapidly drying into fine purplish crystals. From time to time he consulted a wrinkled small bit of onion-skin paper that had formerly been rolled up in a capsule.

He shook the dried crystals from the beaker onto the table.

"Ready, Bostiff," his harsh voice droned out.

Bostiff went to a corner of the steel-lined room. There was a low divan there. He wheeled it toward Doctor Satan, who lay down on it.

"For twelve hours, Bostiff," Doctor Satan said, "my body is helpless, a dead thing. Remember that. And don't let anyone force a way in here!"

"Yes, Master," Bostiff rumbled, gazing at the purple crystals with dull fear in his eyes.

"On my first trip to the land of the dead," Satan said harshly, "I got from Hallowell the secret of the death ray. Now I can kill from a distance, and loot the possessions of the victim at leisure. This trip I expect to get from the recently assassinated dictator of Texas, Kelly Strong, full details of his plan to become dictator of the United States, and names of men he placed in key positions to carry out the scheme. He was ready to start his plan in motion when he was killed. I shall carry on for him, and become dictator in his place. How would you like to be Secretary of State of the United States, Bostiff, with countless men—and women—dancing to your whims to avoid being killed or thrown into jail?"

Bostiff licked his thick lips, and his dull eyes gleamed. Doctor Satan laughed arrogantly, and poured the purplish crystals into a glass of wine.

"Then guard my helpless body with your life, oh good and faithful servant," he said mockingly. "And—don't be so misguided as to attempt to remove my mask and see my face. No man may do that and live!"

Doctor Satan raised the glass of wine,

in which was the little death of Marxman's antidote, and drank.

4

Two people had taken Marxman's drug and died the little death: the dock laborer on whom Marxman had experimented, and Doctor Satan. Now, with Ascott Keane's taking of the purplish crystals, there were three.

His first sensation after swallowing the stuff was—pain.

His body ached as though every bone in it had been broken. He felt as though each nerve were being slowly rasped with red-hot files.

It hurts to die, was his last conscious thought. And after that he seemed to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep that might have lasted a moment or two, or a thousand years, so that his next thought was: the gateway of death is no black river, or cavern mouth guarded by the many-headed watch-dog; it is sleep.

But that was a dim thought, quickly lost in a fog of blind horror as his senses slowly struggled back to him. What was it that horrified him? For a long time he did not know, could not define it.

He had been sitting at his ebony desk when he drank the antidote. When he regained conscious thought he did not know whether he was sitting or standing; for he seemed to have no body, no weight. And that was odd, for when he opened his eyes he could *see* a body. He seemed as solid and weighty as when he had swallowed the drug; and was clothed as he had been then—in most prosaic blue serge.

Yet the inability to tell whether he was standing or lying persisted. He simply *was;* he existed in——

In what?

It was the answer to that which finally brought his blind feeling of horror to a head. For he seemed to exist, now, nothingness!

Beneath him he could see nothing. No ground, as we know it, or surface of any kind. Around him was—nothing. Over him was nothing. It was as though he had been transported, with the drinking of the purplish liquid, into the immensities of space—and then had seen the stars wink out till none remained.

Yet this vast nothingness in which he found himself was not a thing of darkness. Vague gray light was diffused everywhere; like dim moonlight, which is not strong enough to outline things tangibly, yet gives an impression of so doing.

A nothingness of gray space, with Ascott Keane existing in it, but not knowing whether he lay or stood because around him was no single thing by which to orient himself! Where was he? In the land of the dead! And the land of the dead, it seemed, was Nowhere!

Yet he existed, saw himself as he had been last in life. He had, at least to his own perceptions, body and individuality.

But that may be simply the materialization of my thoughts of myself, he thought. If that is so, then I have the answer to the question: does living intelligence die? It does not. The body does, but not the intelligence directing it.

Now, as he existed in the spaceless, dimensionless, objectless gray nothingness, Keane became aware of sensation, of other thoughts and feelings all around him. Countless forces had their source near him. He felt as one feels when surrounded by a great host of people. Yet he could see nothing, though the feel of being hemmed in by countless others grew stronger with each passing minute. (Minute? That was a figurative term. For along with the loss of dimension and space and outline as the living know them, Keane had lost all time-sense.)

Maybe, he thought, I am invisible to them too. Perhaps only the thinking of myself makes me perceptible, and that only to me.

The corollary notion came at once:

But if that is so, then I should be able to see others if I think of them! Then it is directed thought which makes outline here in this gray place; which makes tangible outline.

Well, there was a way to test that. If he thought of someone he had known, now dead, that person might appear. . . .

The most obvious person was his father, who had died when Keane was twelve, and whom he had admired as much as he loved. He thought of his father—heavy-set, with keen gray eyes under bristling gray brows, and with stubby, powerful hands thrust always in his pockets.

And his father appeared before him!

Keane thought he cried aloud. But there was no sound in this land of the dead. He felt his throat swell with the impulse for sound, and that was all.

"Dad!"

"Ascott."

But there was no sound. Vibration, thought-waves—the means of communication were as intangible and cloaked in luminous gray mystery as everything else here. Keane only knew that he looked at his father, dead for twenty years, and felt him name him.

"So you have died, my son," emanated from the figure, seemingly of solidified mist, that had appeared with Keane's thought of it. "Your mother will be anxious to see you——"

"My mother! Then everyone we knew—all people—have a life after death! They exist as they did on earth!"

Keane thought his father smiled. But he could not be sure, because he could not be sure if the face and form of his father were appearing before him, in actual sight—or behind his eyelids, formed by imagination.

"Not quite as on earth," his father said—or, rather, radiated. "Here nothing has actual form. You and I, as well as all other living things, are bits of the great central plant of Life Force, which actuates everything that breathes. When we 'die', we are re-absorbed by the great life stream, though we know no more about it than a drop of water knows the meaning of the river that re-collects it after it has been drawn to the sky by the sun and released again in rain."

"But I see you! I see myself——"

"You see your thought of me, of yourself, not substance. There is no substance here. You will find out, now that you have died."

KEANE thought: queer he doesn't know that I haven't really died; that I will return from this gray land. Then he realized that secret thoughts were as evident to his father as specially directed ones were.

For again he seemed to smile, and he said: "I know nothing of what goes on on earth. None of us do, which is contrary to the idea that I, at least, used to have: that the dead know all. Sometimes I would like to know, but I can't find out. The veil of death keeps us from communicating with the living as well as preventing them from communicating with us."

"But now there *is* communication between dead and living," Keane replied. "And that is why I'm here. On earth a man invented a war weapon which is useless without an antidote that makes it harmless to the men who use the weapon. The antidote, failing in its intended purpose, gives death for half a day to whoever swallows it. Another man, a person without conscience as well as without fear,

stole this secret. He has used it to 'die' and while 'dead' to speak to those actually dead and get from them important information; though how he can do that when they must know his purpose is evil, and must try not to give it to him——"

"Here where all thought either takes physical expression or can be interpreted as clearly as audible speech in life, no thought can remain hidden," his father informed him. "The man you describe has but to think his question, and whoever the thought is directed at will necessarily think the answer. For thought is involuntary. It cannot be controlled. Only physical expression of it can be controlled, and there is nothing physical here."

Thought involuntary? Keane repeated to himself. He did not believe that. It had always been his contention that thought could be controlled by a strong-willed man. But now he was to have immediate proof of his father's correctness.

It was miraculous to converse with him! It was miraculous, and appealing, to think of conversing with his dead mother too. But there was a thought more insistent than either of these: that was the thought (recalled strongly to him by speaking of Doctor Satan to his father) of the diabolical being he had come here to thwart.

And so, converse with his mother, and further converse with his father, were not to be. For with his thought of Doctor Satan—the vague outlines of his father faded, and other outlines began taking their place.

"Satan!" he thought. "Now—I will see his face!"

But he had forgotten his own prosaic blue serge, the fabric that seemed to clothe him now as it had when he "died."

More and more plainly, the outlines of the figure driving his father from his mind appeared to him. And they were still as secretive as they had been on earth!

He saw a lean, tall, red-cloaked shape, with a red mask over its face and red-gloved hands. He saw no revealed feature save arrogant, glittering black eyes through the red mask's eye-holes.

Doctor Satan—still masked against disclosure of identity!

But with the detestably familiar red form another was appearing. And, with the ability here to guess at all thought, even when that thought tries to conceal itself, he realized why.

He was seeing the man Doctor Satan had taken the little death to find! His thought of Satan had brought him into materialization and, as one object roped to a second will lift the second when it itself is lifted, with Satan had come the person he had been conversing with when Keane visioned him.

Keane saw a face that was a little hazy and yet very familiar; a face that was heavy-featured, topped by wavy, iron-gray hair; a face in which a large mouth was mobile over a long, cleft chin; a face often pictured, in life, in the papers. It was the face of Kelly Strong, in life political dictator of the state of Texas, presumed to have had designs on the presidency—and not quite the same presidency as that in the minds of the nation's founders!—before he died.

At the same time, Keane perceived with horror the significance of the meeting of these two. The strange but inevitable phenomenon of thought-transference, which was the rule here, instantly spelled it out for him.

Doctor Satan meant to get the whole of Strong's plans of dictatorship, almost completed before he died, and become dictator himself! And the idea of Satan as dictator was one to stagger the mind!

"My God!" thought Keane. And: "I wonder if I've come in time to stop it. . . ."

WITH his first materialization, Doctor Satan, as aware of Keane as Keane was of him, had turned snarling soundlessly from Strong. His black eyes bored into Keane's gray ones, insane with thwarted purpose. And as both he and Keane concentrated only on each other, the materialization of Kelly Strong slowly disappeared.

And in that instant Keane had his answer, given him as helplessly by Satan's involuntary thoughts as Satan's dead informants gave up their secrets to him.

Doctor Satan had not yet sucked the information he wanted from Strong! Keane had got to him in time!

"Keane!" was Satan's enraged thought. And, though the following words were born in Keane's brain rather than actually heard, he yet thought to hear the man's harsh, arrogant voice. "In the devil's name—how do you manage to cross me *here?*"

But in Keane's mind he read the answer, as the question called up in Keane's brain the memory of his talk with Marxman's secretary-assistant, and the obtaining of a dose of the antidote.

"So Marxman's man made it possible!" Satan raged. "And you guessed what I was doing by the results of the death ray on Linton Yates! Yes, I read it all! I tried to find *you* with the death ray first. But your damned ability, in life if not here, of shielding your thoughts from me, made you an unlocatable target where ordinary men were not! And so you're here——"

"And so I'm here," was Keane's response. "And of the two of us, one is going to stay. And I intend that that one shall be you!"

5

ALONE in the great nothingness of gray, misty light, these two were. Alone in the place of the dead. For here nothing existed that was not thought of. And the two had no slightest thought for anything but each other.

Doctor Satan's red-clad outline shimmered toward Keane, only a projected shadow of the red-clad body that lay in the steel-lined basement room of Furlowe's Folly, but a shadow as sinister and real-appearing as the body itself.

"There is a hell in this place, my friend," he stated. "I have been here once before, and I have found that out. It is like its denizens, only to be perceived when it is thought of. In that hell you shall remain—while I go back to life, a dictator, and freed from your bungling interference for ever."

His black eyes gleamed more brightly.

"A hell, Ascott Keane! It's singularly fitting that I, Doctor Satan, should be the one to cast you into it!"

Keane made no reply. He couldn't have if he had wanted to. For now his eyes were beginning to see strange things in the gray mist; things conjured up by Satan's thought of them.

Slowly the empty space around him was being defined in the shape of a hollow globe, of which he and Satan were the center. And slowly the walls of the globe were narrowing down on them and were becoming more definite.

And Keane tried to cry aloud again as he saw of what the globe was composed, but he could not, since there was no such thing as sound here.

The walls of the globe were a solid, or seemingly solid, mass of bodies. But they were bodies such as had never before been seen outside a nightmare.

Some had no heads. Some seemed all face and mouth, with tiny, puny limbs

attached. Some were legless or armless or both. And all were blind.

Pallid gray shapes in the pallid grayness, they writhed and reached toward Keane and Satan; yet Keane knew intuitively that it was not Doctor Satan who engaged their attention, but solely himself. And he shuddered as he thought of being engulfed by the crippled, maimed, writhing things.

"That is just what shall happen," he perceived Satan speaking to him. "They shall take your soul here, Keane. These things were men and women on earth. They were 'crippled morally', as society chose to express it—just as you believe I am morally crippled when really . . . but we won't go into that."

The black eyes glittered satanically.

"Here, after death, they are warped and deformed as they were in life. Creatures of hell, Keane. And as destructive and murderous here as when they had actuality. But it is seldom they have the chance to try their talent for destructiveness now. They shall try it on you."

The hollow globe was very small now. Keane had the impression that he could almost reach out and touch the hideous shapes composing the wall—had there been anything there really to touch.

"They'll get Doctor Satan too," he thought frantically. "There's no reason why they should pursue me and not him."

But he knew as he thought it that there was a reason.

The lean tall form in the red cloak, and these warped creatures of after-life, were of the same stuff. Satan could command them, not be destroyed by them, because he thought as they did and lived as they had lived before death took them.

"Take him!" he caught Satan's soundless command to the hideous gray shapes. "Take his soul. Hold it here, that on earth his body may be for ever a lifeless shell, with soul and intelligence gone!"

And then the gray shapes were on Keane, and he was a wavering form in a monstrous sea.

There was no pain. He saw claw-like hands rip into him, and saw the likeness of his body shredded from him as bits of cloud are shredded from the main cloud bank by a screaming wind. But there was, of course, no pain.

However, there was mental agony far exceeding any physical pain. He had no way of being told it, but he knew the truth: If these clawing hands managed to rip away entirely the thought-mantle that clothed his spirit, if they managed to strip him of his conception of himself, then he could never go back the way he came. He would be really dead, with no link left between him and the hulk of himself that sat before the empty water glass on his ebony desk.

"Take him!" Doctor Satan was exhorting the host he would assuredly join when it was his turn really to die. "Strip his soul! Keep him here!"

No real substance, but mist-stuff that could be shredded and torn as misty veils are torn! Keane struggled in the hideous current of writhing, clawing, venomous forms. Doctor Satan was near him. He got to the red-cloaked form.

He had but half an arm left, though like a man in a nightmare he could look at it and be appalled and yet feel no pain. But the hand remained on this arm, the whole underside of which had been clawed away. That hand drove for Satan's throat, and found it.

Perhaps it was because Keane was not really dead, and that hence his materialization had a shade more actuality than those of the writhing things about them. Perhaps it was that his hate of the man, whose cruel joke it was to act as Lucifer as well as costume himself in Luciferian

manner, was strong enough to take some tangible form here in a place of intangibility. At any rate, Keane's one crippled hand did more damage than all the clawing hands of all the clawing things that tore at him.

Like a ball of mist on a mist-column, Satan's head wavered and seemed about to leave its body as Keane's hand grasped at the shadowy throat.

"Take him!" Satan exhorted, frenziedly, fearfully, to the crawling throng. "Take him——"

His own red-gloved hands were wrenching and tearing at Keane's mangled wrist. But they could not tear it loose.

"Take him——"

Something was happening to Keane.

Suddenly, impossibly, he was beginning to feel pain. It was as though every bone in his body were being broken and every atom of flesh on them crushed. As the pain swept down on him in ever-increasing waves, the horrible gray shapes faded from his perception—as did the red-clad form of Doctor Satan. The luminous gray nothingness in which he had moved for an unguessable length of time (it might have been a minute or a year or a century) began to fade too.

There was Satan's thwarted, raging command, *"Take him——"* There was a last vengeful tightening of his hand on Satan's throat. Then the pain mounted over everything else and robbed him of consciousness. . . .

A voice was calling to him. A girl's voice, frantic, urgent.

"Ascott! Ascott!"

He tried to open his eyes, and could not for a moment. He was shuddering, and felt clammy with perspiration. He had just undergone some terrible ordeal, but for a little while longer he was spared memory of it.

"Ascott! Darling——"

He knew that voice. Yes . . . the voice of Beatrice Dale . . . yes. . . .

With an enormous effort he opened his eyes. He saw the polished ebony of his desk-top within inches of his face; saw his hands.

His hands! He gasped, and stared at them as memory returned. But his hands were all right. He had them both, and neither was torn nor mutilated. Nor were his arms.

"Nightmare!" he muttered.

But he knew better than that. He had undergone an actual experience in an actual place: the land of the dead. Now——

He sat up. He had been slumped over his desk with his hands supporting his head while his intelligence roamed afar from his body under the influence of Marxman's antidote. But now he sat up—and saw Beatrice's white face.

"Ascott! Thank God! You've been unconscious—dead, from all appearances—for an hour over the twelve the drug was supposed to stop working! I was going to call a doctor, the police, anything! But now——"

"Now I'm all right," said Keane, breathing heavily. "All right—now—nightmare I went through."

Beatrice bathed his clammy face, gave him adrenalin, ministered to him with all the affection she kept from expressing verbally for him. And then, when he was breathing normally and, while pale, seemed all right again, she said:

"Did you—did you find Doctor Satan, Ascott?"

Keane's nostrils thinned.

"I did. I got him in time. And—he almost got me. He calls himself Doctor Satan—and there is a hell, Beatrice, and at his command I was almost kept in it! I wonder. . . . Many a circumstance is shaped apparently by coincidence, and

many a mortal unconsciously acts in a way to bear out literally the conceptions of religion. An actual hell. . . . I wonder if our red-cloaked friend really could be an incarnation of the evil force we've always called Satan, though he himself thinks he is only acting a part?"

"Drink this," said Beatrice, handing him a cup of coffee with the practicality of the female. "Ascott, did Doctor Satan come back to life too?"

"I'm afraid he did," sighed Keane.

"Then everything was useless? Satan can return whenever he pleases, and get the secrets of the dead as he did before?"

Keane shook his head.

"That, at least, I think we can stop. There is a hell, and creatures in it like maimed demons. Then it follows that there must be beings in the land of the dead who were decent in life and so are in death. And it also must follow that they outnumber the maimed."

He stared at the coffee, making no effort to drink it.

"I was almost kept from returning to life by the things from hell. I think Doctor Satan might be kept from returning to life by the decent dead. Anyway, I'm going back, now, to see my father and band the dead against Satan if he should ever return. Go to Marxman's assistant and get another dose of the antidote."

"For God's sake, Ascott——"

Keane stared at her. His eyes were as grim as death, and as impersonal.

"Get more of the drug, please, Beatrice."

Beatrice Dale's lips parted, closed again without uttering words. She turned and left him.

Haunted

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

Old houses seem to creak a lot at night.
  I've known the sounds come right across a floor
That seemed to give, as from some passing step,
  And up the stairs, and past my bedroom door;
And in the dark I couldn't see what passed,
  But always there was wafted in a smell
Such as you find in vaults long closed; and, too,
  My room grew dank and chilly as a well.

That was the house where once a spy was caught.
  They hung him from an attic rafter there,
With those who harbored him. . . . One woman moved
  Before she got unpacked. I heard her swear
That on the stairs, when it was only dusk,
  She felt the clammy touch of someone's ghost.
I found that when the creaking came at night,
  It was the attic rafters creaked the most.

The Black Abbot of Puthuum

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

The tale of a ghastly horror in a weird monastery of the desert

Let the grape yield for us its purple flame,
And rosy love put off its maidenhood:
By blackening moons, in lands without a name,
We slew the Incubus and all his brood.
—*Song of King Hoaraph's Bowmen.*

ZOBAL the archer and Cushara the pike-bearer had poured many a libation to their friendship in the sanguine liquors of Yoros and the blood of the kingdom's enemies. In that long and lusty amity, broken only by such passing quarrels as concerned the division of a wine-skin or the apportioning of a wench, they had served amid the soldiery of King Hoaraph for a strenuous decade. Savage warfare and wild, fantastic hazard had been their lot. The renown of their valor had drawn upon them, ultimately, the honor of Hoaraph's attention, and he had assigned them for duty among the picked warriors that guarded his palace in Faraad. And sometimes the twain were sent together on such missions as required no common hardihood and no disputable fealty to the king.

Now, in company with the eunuch Simban, chief purveyor to Hoaraph's well-replenished harem, Zobal and Cushara had gone on a tedious journey through the tract known as Izdrel, which clove the western part of Yoros asunder with its rusty-colored wedge of desolation. The king had sent them to learn if haply there abode any verity in certain travelers' tales, which concerned a young maiden of celestial beauty who had been seen among the pastoral peoples beyond Izdrel. Simban bore at his girdle a bag of gold coins with which, if the girl's pulchritude should be in any wise commensurate with the renown thereof, he was empowered to bargain for her purchase. The king had deemed that Zobal and Cushara should form an escort equal to all contingencies: for Izdrel was a land reputedly free of robbers, or, indeed, of any human inhabitants. Men said, however, that malign goblins, tall as giants and humped like camels, had oftentimes beset the wayfarers through Izdrel; that fair but ill-meaning lamiæ had lured them to an eldritch death. Simban, quaking corpulently in his saddle, rode with small willingness on that outward journey; but the archer and the pike-bearer, full of wholesome skepticism, divided their bawdy jests between the timid eunuch and the elusive demons.

Without other mishap than the rupturing of a wine-skin from the force of the new vintage it contained, they came to the verdurous pasture-lands beyond that dreary desert. Here, in low valleys that held the middle meanderings of the river Vos, cattle and dromedaries were kept by a tribe of herders who sent biannual tribute to Hoaraph from their teeming droves. Simban and his companions found the girl, who dwelt with her grandmother in a village beside the Vos; and even the eunuch acknowledged that their journey was well rewarded.

Cushara and Zobal, on their part, were instantly smitten by the charms of the maiden, whose name was Rubalsa. She

"This shape the warriors recognised as the abbot Ujuk."

was slender and of queenly height, and her skin was pale as the petals of white poppies; and the undulant blackness of her heavy hair was full of sullen copper gleamings beneath the sun. While Simban haggled shrilly with the crone-like grandmother, the warriors eyed Rubalsa with circumspect ardor and addressed to her such gallantries as they deemed discreet within hearing of the eunuch.

At last the bargain was driven and the price paid, to the sore depletion of Simban's money-bag. Simban was now eager to return to Faraad with his prize, and he seemed to have forgotten his fear of the haunted desert. Zobal and Cushara were routed from their dreams by the impatient eunuch before dawn; and the three departed with the still drowsy Rubalsa ere the village could awaken about them.

NOON, with its sun of candent copper in a blackish-blue zenith, found them far amid the rusty sands and iron-toothed ridges of Izdrel. The route they followed was little more than a foot-path: for, though Izdrel was but thirty miles in width at that point, few travel-

ers would dare those fiend-infested leagues; and most preferred an immensely circuitous road, used by the herders, that ran to the southward of that evil desolation, following the Vos nearly to its debouchment in the Indaskian Sea.

Cushara, splendid in his plate-armor of bronze, on a huge piebald mare with a cataphract of leather scaled with copper, led the cavalcade. Rubalsa, who wore the red homespun of the herders' women, followed on a black gelding with silk and silver harness, which Hoaraph had sent for her use. Close behind her came the watchful eunuch, gorgeous in particolored sendal, and mounted ponderously, with swollen saddle-bags all about him, on the gray ass of uncertain age which, through his fear of horses and camels, he insisted on riding at all times. In his hand he held the leading-rope of another ass which was nearly crushed to the ground by the wine-skins, water-jugs and other provisions. Zobal guarded the rear, with unslung bow, slim and wiry in his suiting of light chain-mail, on a nervous stallion that chafed incessantly at the rein. At his back he bore a quiver filled with arrows which the court sorcerer, Amdok, had prepared with singular spells and dippings in doubtful fluids, for his possible use against demons. Zobal had accepted the arrows courteously but had satisfied himself later that their iron barbs were in no wise impaired by Amdok's treatment. A similarly ensorceled pike had been offered by Amok to Cushara, who had refused it bluffly, saying that his own well-tried weapon was equal to the spitting of any number of devils.

Because of Simban and the two asses, the party could make little speed. However, they hoped to cross the wilder and more desolate portion of Izdrel ere night. Simban, though he still eyed the dismal waste dubiously, was plainly more concerned with his precious charge than with the imagined imps and lamiæ. And Cushara and Zobal, both rapt in amorous reveries that centered about the luscious Rubalsa, gave only a perfunctory attention to their surroundings.

The girl had ridden all morning in demure silence. Now, suddenly, she cried out in a voice whose sweetness was made shrill by alarm. The others reined their mounts, and Simban babbled questions. To these Rubalsa replied by pointing toward the southern horizon, where, as her companions now saw, a peculiar pitch-black darkness had covered a great portion of the sky and hills, obliterating them wholly. This darkness, which seemed due neither to cloud nor sandstorm, extended itself in a crescent on either hand, and came swiftly toward the travelers. In the course of a minute or less, it had blotted the pathway before and behind them like a black mist; and the two arcs of shadow, racing northward, had flowed together, immuring the party in a circle. The darkness then became stationary, its walls no more than a hundred feet away on every side. Sheer, impenetrable, it surrounded the wayfarers, leaving above them a clear space from which the sun still glared down, remote and small and discolored, as if seen from the bottom of a deep pit.

"Ai! ai! ai!" howled Simban, cowering amid his saddle-bags. "I knew well that some devilry would overtake us."

At the same moment the two asses began to bray loudly, and the horses, with a frantic neighing and squealing, trembled beneath their riders. Only with much cruel spurring could Zobal force his stallion forward beside Cushara's mare.

"Mayhap it is only some pestilential mist," said Cushara.

"Never have I seen such mist," replied Zobal doubtfully. "And there are no va-

pors to be met with in Izdrel. Methinks it is like the smoke of the seven hells that men fable beneath Zothique."

"Shall we ride forward?" said Cushara. "I would learn whether or not a pike can penetrate that darkness."

Calling out some words of reassurance to Rubalsa, the twain sought to spur their mounts toward the murky wall. But, after a few swerving paces, the mare and the stallion balked wildly, sweating and snorting, and would go no farther. Cushara and Zobal dismounted and continued their advance on foot.

Not knowing the source or nature of the phenomenon with which they had to deal, the two approached it warily. Zobal nocked an arrow to his string, and Cushara held the great bronze-headed pike before him as if charging an embattled foe. Both were more and more puzzled by the murkiness, which did not recede before them in the fashion of fog, but maintained its opacity when they were close upon it.

CUSHARA was about to thrust his weapon into the wall. Then, without the least prelude, there arose in the darkness, seemingly just before him, a horrible multitudinous clamor as of drums, trumpets, cymbals, jangling armor, jarring voices, and mailed feet that tramped to and fro on the stony ground with a mighty clangor. As Cushara and Zobal drew back in amazement, the clamor swelled and spread till it filled with a babel of war-like noises the whole circle of mysterious night that hemmed in the travelers.

"Verily, we are sore beset," shouted Cushara to his comrade as they went back to their horses. "It would seem that some king of the north has sent his myrmidons into Yoros."

"Yea," said Zobal. . . . "But it is strange that we saw them not ere the darkness came. And the darkness, surely, is no natural thing."

Before Cushara could make any rejoinder, the martial clashings and shoutings ceased abruptly. All about it seemed that there was a rattling of innumerable sistra, a hissing of countless huge serpents, a raucous hooting of ill-omened birds that had foregathered by thousands. To these indescribably hideous sounds, the horses now added a continual screaming, and the asses a more frenzied braying, above which the outcries of Rubalsa and Simban were scarce audible.

Cushara and Zobal sought vainly to pacify their mounts and comfort the madly frightened girl. It was plain that no army of mortal men had beleaguered them: for the noises still changed from instant to instant, and they heard a most evil howling, and a roaring as of hell-born beasts that deafened them with its volume.

Naught, however, was visible in the gloom, whose circle now began to move swiftly, without widening or contracting. To maintain their position in its center, the warriors and their charges were compelled to leave the path and to flee northwardly amid the harsh ridges and hollows. All around them the baleful noises continued, keeping, as it seemed, the same interval of distance.

The sun, slanting westward, no longer shone into that eerily moving pit, and a deep twilight enveloped the wanderers. Zobal and Cushara rode as closely beside Rubalsa as the rough ground permitted, straining their eyes constantly for any visible sign of the cohorts that seemed to encompass them. Both were filled with the darkest misgivings, for it had become all too manifest that supernatural powers were driving them astray in the untracked desert.

Moment by moment the gross darkness

seemed to close in; and there was a palpable eddying and seething as of monstrous forms behind its curtain. The horses stumbled over boulders and outcroppings of ore-sharp stone, and the grievously burdened asses were compelled to put forth an unheard-of speed to keep pace with the ever-shifting circle that menaced them with its horrid clamor. Rubalsa had ceased her outcries, as if overcome by exhaustion or resignation to the horror of her plight; and the shrill screeches of the eunuch had subsided into a fearful wheezing and gasping.

Ever and anon, it seemed that great fiery eyes glared out of the gloom, floating close to earth or moving aloft at a gigantic height. Zobal began to shoot his enchanted arrows at these appearances, and the speeding of each bolt was hailed by an appalling outburst of Satanic laughters and ululations.

In such wise they went on, losing all measure of time and sense of orientation. The animals were galled and footsore. Simban was nigh dead from fright and fatigue; Rubalsa drooped in her saddle; and the warriors, awed and baffled by the predicament in which their weapons appeared useless, began to flag with a dull weariness.

"Never again shall I doubt the legendry of Izdrel," said Cushara gloomily.

"It is in my mind that we have not long either to doubt or believe," rejoined Zobal.

To add to their distress, the terrain grew rougher and steeper, and they climbed acclivitous hillsides and went down endlessly into drear valleys. Anon they came to a flat, open, pebbly space. There, all at once, it seemed that the pandemonium of evil noises drew back on every hand, receding and fading into faint, dubious whispers that died at a vast remove. Simultaneously, the circling night thinned out, and a few stars shone in the welkin, and the sharp-spined hills of the desert loomed starkly against a vermilion afterglow. The travelers paused and peered wonderingly at one another in a gloom that was no more than that of natural twilight.

"What new devilry is this?" asked Cushara, hardly daring to believe that the hellish leaguers had vanished.

"I know not," said the archer, who was staring into the dusk. "But here, mayhap, is one of the devils."

The others now saw that a muffled figure was approaching them, bearing a lit lantern made of some kind of translucent horn. At some distance behind the figure, lights appeared suddenly in a square dark mass which none of the party had discerned before. This mass was evidently a large building with many windows.

The figure, drawing near, was revealed by the dim yellowish lantern as a black man of immense girth and tallness, garbed in a voluminous robe of saffron such as was worn by certain monkish orders, and crowned with the two-horned purple hat of an abbot. He was indeed a singular and unlooked-for apparition: for if any monasteries existed amid the barren reaches of Izdrel, they were hidden and unknown to the world. Zobal, however, searching his memory, recalled a vague tradition he had once heard concerning a chapter of negro monks that had flourished in Yoros many centuries ago. The chapter had long been extinct, and the very site of its monastery was forgotten. Nowadays there were few blacks anywhere in the kingdom, other than those who did duty as eunuchs guarding the seraglios of nobles and rich merchants.

The animals began to display a certain uneasiness at the stranger's approach.

"Who art thou?" challenged Cushara.

his fingers tightening on the haft of his weapon.

The black man grinned capaciously, showing great rows of discolored teeth whose incisors were like those of a wild dog. His enormous unctuous jowls were creased by the grin into folds of amazing number and volume; and his eyes, deeply slanted and close together, seemed to wink perpetually in pouches that shook like ebon jellies. His nostrils flared prodigiously; his purple, blubbery lips drooled and quivered, and he licked them with a fat, red, salacious tongue before replying to Cushara's question.

"I am Ujuk, abbot of the monastery of Puthuum," he said, in a thick voice of such extraordinary volume that it appeared almost to issue from the earth under his feet. "Methinks the night has overtaken you far from the route of travelers. I bid you welcome to our hospitality."

"Aye, the night took us betimes," Cushara returned dryly. Neither he nor Zobal was reassured by the look of lust in the abbot's obscenely twinkling eyes as he peered at Rubalsa. Moreover, they had now noted the excessive and disagreeable length of the dark nails on his huge hands and bare, splayed feet: nails that were curving, three-inch talons, sharp as those of some beast or bird of prey.

It seemed, however, that Rubalsa and Simban were less abhorrently impressed, or had not noticed these details: for both made haste to acknowledge the abbot's proffer of hospitality and to urge acceptance upon the visibly reluctant warriors. To this urging, Zobal and Cushara yielded, both inwardly resolving to keep a close watch on all the actions and movements of the abbot of Puthuum.

Ujuk, holding the horn lantern aloft, conducted the travelers to that massive building whose lights they had discerned at no great distance. A ponderous gate of dark wood swung open silently at their approach, and they entered a spacious courtyard cobbled with worn, greasy-looking stones, and dimly illumined by torches in rusty iron sockets. Several monks appeared with startling suddenness before the travelers, who had thought the courtyard vacant at first glance. They were all of unusual bulk and stature, and their features possessed an extraordinary likeness to those of Ujuk, from whom, indeed, they could hardly have been distinguished save by the yellow cowls which they wore in lieu of the abbot's horned purple hat. The similarity extended even to their curved and talon-like nails of inordinate length. Their movements were fantasmally furtive and silent. Without speaking, they took charge of the horses and asses. Cushara and Zobal relinquished their mounts to the care of these doubtful hostlers with a reluctance which, apparently, was not shared by Rubalsa or the eunuch.

The monks also signified a willingness to relieve Cushara of his heavy pike and Zobal of his ironwood bow and half-emptied quiver of ensorceled arrows. But at this the warriors balked, refusing to let the weapons pass from their possession.

Ujuk then led them to an inner portal which gave admission to the refectory. It was a large, low room, lit by brazen lamps of antique workmanship, such as ghouls might have recovered from a desert-sunken tomb. The abbot, with ogre-like grinnings, besought his guests to take their place at a long massive table of ebony with chairs and benches of the same material.

When they had seated themselves, Ujuk sat down at the table's head. Immediately, four monks came in, bearing platters piled with spicily smoking viands, and deep earthen flagons full of a dark

amber-brown liquor. And these monks, like those encountered in the courtyard, were gross ebon-black simulacra of their abbot, resembling him precisely in every feature and member. Zobal and Cushara were chary of tasting the liquor, which, from its odor, appeared to be an exceptionally potent kind of ale: for their doubts concerning Ujuk and his monastery grew graver every moment. Also, in spite of their hunger, they refrained from the food set before them, which consisted mainly of baked meats that neither could identify. Simban and Rubalsa, however, addressed themselves promptly to the meal with appetites sharpened by long fasting and the weird fatigues of the day.

The warriors observed that neither food nor drink had been placed before Ujuk, and they conjectured that he had already dined. To their growing disgust and anger, he sat lolling obesely, with lustful eyes upon Rubalsa in a stare broken only by the nictations that accompanied his perpetual grinning. This stare soon began to abash the girl, and then to alarm and frighten her. She ceased eating; and Simban, who had been deeply preoccupied till then with his supper, was plainly perturbed when he saw the flagging of her appetite. He seemed for the first time to notice the abbot's unmonastic leering, and showed his disapproval by sundry horrible grimaces. He also remarked pointedly, in a loud, piercing voice, that the girl was destined for the harem of King Hoaraph. But at this, Ujuk merely chuckled, as if Simban had uttered some exquisitely humorous jest.

Zobal and Cushara were hard put to repress their wrath, and both itched hotly for the fleshing of their weapons in the abbot's gross bulk. He, however, seemed to have taken Simban's hint, for he shifted his gaze from the girl. Instead, he began to eye the warriors with a curious and loathsome avidity, which they found little less insupportable than his ogling of Rubalsa. The well-nourished eunuch also came in for his share of Ujuk's regard, which seemed to have in it the hunger of a hyena gloating over his prospective prey.

Simban, obviously ill at ease, and somewhat frightened, now tried to carry on a conversation with the abbot, volunteering much information as to himself, his companions, and the adventures which had brought them to Puthuum. Ujuk seemed little surprized by this information; and Zobal and Cushara, who took no part in the conversation, became surer than ever that he was no true abbot.

"How far have we gone astray from the route to Faraad?" asked Simban.

"I do not consider that you have gone astray," rumbled Ujuk in his subterranean voice, "for your coming to Puthuum is most timely. We have few guests here, and we are loth to part with those who honor our hospitality."

"King Hoaraph will be impatient for our return with the girl," Simban quavered. "We must depart early tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is another matter," said Ujuk, in a tone half unctuous, half sinister. "Perhaps, by then, you will have forgotten this deplorable haste."

Little was said during the rest of the meal; and, indeed, little was drunk or eaten; for even Simban seemed to have lost his normally voracious appetite. Ujuk, still grinning as if at some uproarious jest known only to himself, was apparently not concerned with the urging of food upon his guests.

Certain of the monks came and went unbidden, removing the laden dishes, and as they departed, Zobal and Cushara perceived a strange thing: for no shadows were cast by the monks on the lamplit

floor beside the moving adumbrations of the vessels they carried! From Ujuk, however, a heavy, misshapen umbrage fell and lay like a prone incubus beside his chair.

"Methinks we have come to a hatching-place of demons," whispered Zobal to Cushara. "We have fought many men, thou and I, but never such as wanted wholesome shadows."

"Aye," muttered the pike-bearer. . . . "But I like this abbot even less than his monks: though he alone is the caster of a shade."

UJUK now rose from his seat, saying: "I trow that ye are all weary and would sleep betimes."

Rubalsa and Simban, who had both drunk a certain amount of the powerful ale of Puthuum, nodded a drowsy assent. Zobal and Cushara, noting their premature sleepiness, were glad they had declined the liquor.

The abbot led his guests along a corridor whose gloom was but little relieved by the flaring of torches in a strong draft that blew stealthily from an undetermined source, causing a rout of wild shadows to flitter beside the passers. On either hand there were cells with portals shut only by hangings of a coarse hempen fabric. The monks had all vanished, the cells were seemingly dark, and an air of age-old desolation pervaded the monastery, together with a smell as of moldering bones piled in some secret catacomb.

Midway in the hall, Ujuk paused and held aside the arras of a doorway that differed in no wise from the rest. Within, a lamp burned, depending from an archaic chain of curiously linked and fretted metal. The room was bare but spacious, and a bed of ebony with opulent quiltings of an olden fashion stood by the farther wall under an open window. This chamber, the abbot indicated, was for the occupancy of Rubalsa; and he then offered to show the men and the eunuch their respective quarters.

Simban, seeming to wake all at once from his drowsiness, protested at the idea of being separated in such wise from his charge. As if Ujuk had been prepared for this, and had given orders accordingly, a monk appeared forthwith, bringing quilts which he laid on the flagged floor within the portals of Rubalsa's room. Simban stretched himself promptly on the improvised bed, and the warriors withdrew with Ujuk.

"Come," said the abbot, his wolfish teeth gleaming in the torchlight. "Ye will sleep soundly in the beds I have prepared."

Zobal and Cushara, however, had now assumed the position of guardsmen outside the doorway of Rubalsa's chamber. They told Ujuk curtly that they were responsible to King Hoaraph for the girl's safety and must watch over her at all times.

"I wish ye a pleasant vigil," said Ujuk, with a cachinnation like the laughter of hyenas in some underground tomb.

With his departure, it seemed that the black slumber of a dead antiquity settled upon all the building. Rubalsa and Simban, apparently, slept without stirring, for there was no sound from behind the hempen arras. The warriors spoke only in whispers, lest they should arouse the girl. Their weapons held ready for instant use, they watched the shadowy hall with a jealous vigilance: for they did not trust the quietude about them, being well assured that a host of foul cacodemons couched somewhere behind it, biding the time of assault.

Howbeit, nothing occurred to reconfirm them in such apprehensions. The draft that breathed furtively along the hall seemed to tell only of age-forgotten death and cyclic solitude. The two began

to perceive signs of dilapidation in walls and floor that had heretofore escaped their notice. Eery, fantastical thoughts came to them with insidious persuasion: it seemed that the building was a ruin that had lain uninhabited for a thousand years; that the black abbot Ujuk and his shadowless monks were mere imaginations, things that had never been; that the moving circle of darkness, the pandemonian voices, that had herded them toward Puthuum, were no more than a daymare whose memory was now fading in the fashion of dreams.

Thirst and hunger troubled them, for they had not eaten since early morn, and had snatched only a few hasty drafts of wine or water during the day. Both, however, began to feel the oncreeping of a sleepy hebetude which, under the circumstances, was most undesirable. They nodded, started and awoke recurrently to their peril. But still, like a siren voice in poppy-dreams, the silence seemed to tell them that all danger was a bygone thing, an illusion that belonged to yesterday.

SEVERAL hours passed, and the hall lightened with the rising of a late moon that shone through a window at its eastern end. Zobal, less bedrowsed than Cushara, was awakened to full awareness by a sudden commotion among the animals in the courtyard without. There were loud neighings that rose to a frenzied pitch, as if something had frightened the horses; and to these the asses began to add their heavy braying, till Cushara was also aroused.

"Make sure that thou drowsest not again," Zobal admonished the pike-bearer. "I shall go forth and inquire as to the cause of this tumult."

"'Tis a good thought," commended Cushara. "And while thou art gone, see to it that none has molested our provisions. And bring back with thee some apricots and cakes of sesame and a skin of ruby-red wine."

The monastery itself remained silent as Zobal went down the hall, his buskins of link-covered leather ringing faintly. At the hall's end an outer door stood open, and he passed through it into the courtyard. Even as he emerged, the animals ceased their clamor. He could see but dimly, for all the torches in the courtyard, save one, had burnt out or been extinguished; and the low gibbous moon had not yet climbed the wall. Nothing, to all appearance, was amiss: the two asses were standing quietly beside the mountainous piles of provisions and saddle-bags they had borne; the horses seemed to drowse amicably in a group. Zobal decided that perhaps there had been some temporary bickering between his stallion and Cushara's mare.

He went forward to make sure that there was no other cause of disturbance. Afterward he turned to the wine-skins, intending to refresh himself before rejoining Cushara with a supply of drinkables and comestibles. Hardly had he washed the dust of Izdrel from his throat with a long draft, when he heard an eery, dry whispering whose source and distance he could not at once determine. Sometimes it seemed at his very ear, and then it ebbed away as if sinking into profound subterranean vaults. But the sound, though variable in this manner, never ceased entirely; and it seemed to shape itself into words that the listener almost understood: words that were fraught with the hopeless sorrow of a dead man who had sinned long ago, and had repented his sin through black sepulchral ages.

As he harkened to the sere anguish of that sound, the hair bristled on the archer's neck, and he knew such fear as he had never known in the thick of battle.

And yet, at the same time, he was aware of deeper pity than the pain of dying comrades had ever aroused in his heart. And it seemed that the voice implored him for commiseration and succor, laying upon him a weird compulsion that he dared not disobey. He could not wholly comprehend the things that the whisperer besought him to do: but somehow he must ease that desolate anguish.

Still the whispering rose and fell; and Zobal forgot that he had left Cushara to a lone vigil beset with hellish dangers; forgot that the voice itself might well be only a device of demons to lure him astray. He began to search the courtyard, his keen ears alert for the source of the sound; and, after some dubitation, he decided that it issued from the ground in a corner opposite the gateway. Here, amid the cobbling, in the wall's angle, he found a large slab of syenite with a rusty metal ring in its center. He was quickly confirmed in his decision: for the whispering became louder and more articulate, and he thought that it said to him: "Lift the slab."

The archer grasped the rusty ring with both hands, and putting forth all his strength, he succeeded in tilting back the stone, albeit not without such exertion as made him feel that his very spine would crack. A dark opening was exposed, and from it surged a charnel stench so overpowering that Zobal turned his face away and was like to have vomited. But the whisper came with a sharp, woful beseeching, out of the darkness below; and it said to him: "Descend."

Zobal wrenched from its socket the one torch that still burned in the courtyard. By its lurid flaring he saw a flight of worn steps that went down into the reeking sepulchral gloom; and resolutely he descended the steps, finding himself at their bottom in a hewn vault with deep shelves of stone on either hand. The shelves, running away into darkness, were piled with human bones and mummified bodies; and plainly the place was the catacomb of the monastery.

The whispering had ceased, and Zobal peered about him in bewilderment not unmixed with horror.

"I am here," resumed the dry, susurrous voice, issuing from amid the heaps of mortal remnants on the shelf close beside him. Startled, and feeling again that crisping of the hairs on his neck, Zobal held his torch to the low shelf as he looked for the speaker. In a narrow niche between stacks of disarticulated bones, he beheld a half-decayed corpse about whose long, attenuate limbs and hollow body there clung a few rotten shreds of yellow cloth. These, he thought, were the remnants of a robe such as was worn by the monks of Puthuum. Then, thrusting his torch into the niche, he discerned the lean, mummy-like head, on which moldered a thing that had once been the horned hat of an abbot. The corpse was black as ebony, and plainly it was that of a great negro. It bore an aspect of incredible age, as if it had lain there for centuries: but from it came the odor of newly-ripe corruption that had sickened Zobal when he lifted the slab of syenite.

As he stood staring down, it seemed to Zobal that the cadaver stirred a little, as if fain to rise from its recumbent posture; and he saw a gleaming as of eyeballs in the deep-shadowed sockets; and the dolorously curling lips were retracted still farther; and from between the bared teeth there issued that awful whispering which had drawn him into the catacomb.

"LISTEN closely," said the whispering. "There is much for me to tell thee, and much for thee to do when the telling is done.

"I am Uldor, the abbot of Puthuum.

More than a thousand years ago I came with my monks to Yoros from Ilcar, the black empire of the north. The emperor of Ilcar had driven us forth, for our cult of celibacy, our worship of the maiden goddess Ojhal, were hateful to him. Here amid the desert of Izdrel we built our monastery and dwelt unmolested.

"We were many in number at first; but the years went by, and one by one the Brothers were laid in the catacomb we had delved for our resting-place. They died with none to replace them. I alone survived in the end: for I had won such sanctity as ensures longevous days, and had also become a master of the arts of sorcery. Time was a demon that I held at bay, like one who stands in a charmed circle. My powers were still hale and unimpaired; and I lived on as an anchorite in the monastery.

"At first the solitude was far from irksome to me, and I was wholly absorbed in my study of the arcana of nature. But after a time it seemed that such things no longer sufficed. I grew aware of my loneliness, and was much beset by the demons of the waste, who had troubled me little heretofore. Succubi, fair but baneful, lamiæ with the round soft bodies of women, came to tempt me in the drear vigils of the night.

"I resisted. . . . But there was one she-devil, more cunning than the others, who crept into my cell in the semblance of a girl I had loved long ago, ere yet I had taken the vows of Ojhal. To her I succumbed; and of that unholy union was born the half-human fiend, Ujuk, who has since called himself the abbot of Puthuum.

"After that sin, I wished to die. . . . And the wish was manifoldly strengthened when I beheld the progeny of the sin. Too greatly, however, had I offended Ojhal; and a frightful penance was decreed for me. I lived . . . and daily I was plagued and persecuted by the monster, Ujuk, who grew lustily in the manner of such offspring. But when Ujuk had gained his full stature, there came upon me such weakness and decrepitude as made me hopeful of death. Scarce could I stir in my impotence, and Ujuk, taking advantage of this, bore me in his horrid arms to the catacomb and laid me among the dead. Here I have remained ever since, dying and rotting eternally—and yet eternally alive. For almost a millennium I have suffered unsleepingly the dire anguish of repentance that brings no expiation.

"Through the powers of saintly and sorcerous vision that never left me, I was doomed to watch the foul deeds, the hell-dark iniquities of Ujuk. Wearing the guise of an abbot, endowed with strange infernal powers together with a kind of immortality, he has presided over Puthuum through the centuries. His enchantments have kept the monastery hidden . . . save from those that he wishes to draw within reach of his ghoulish hunger, his incubus-like desires. Men he devours; and women are made to serve his lust. . . . And still I am condemned to see his turpitudes; and the seeing is my most grievous punishment."

The whisper sank away; and Zobal, who had listened in eldritch awe, as one who hears the speech of a dead man, was doubtful for a moment that Uldor still lived. Then the sere voice went on:

"Archer, I crave a boon from thee; and I offer in return a thing that will aid thee against Ujuk. In thy quiver thou bearest charmed arrows: and the wizardry of him that wrought them was good. Such arrows can slay the else-immortal powers of evil. They can slay Ujuk—and even such evil as endures in me and forbids me to die. Archer, grant me an arrow through the heart: and if that suffice not, an arrow through the right eye, and one

through the left. And leave the arrows in their mark, for I deem that thou canst well spare so many. One alone is needed for Ujuk. As to the monks thou hast seen, I will tell thee a secret. They are twelve in number, but——"

Zobal would scarcely have believed the thing that Uldor now unfolded, if the events of the day had not left him beyond all incredulity. The abbot continued:

"When I am wholly dead, take thou the talisman which depends about my neck. The talisman is a touchstone that will dissolve such ill enchantments as have a material seeming, if applied thereto with the hand."

For the first time, Zobal perceived the talisman, which was an oval of plain gray stone lying upon Uldor's withered bosom on a chain of black silver.

"Make haste, O archer," the whispering implored.

Zobal had socketed his torch in the pile of moldering bones beside Uldor. With a sense of mingled compulsion and reluctance, he drew an arrow from his quiver, notched it, and aimed unflinchingly down at Uldor's heart. The shaft went straightly and deeply into its mark; and Zobal waited. But anon from the retracted lips of the black abbot there issued a faint murmuring: "Archer, another arrow!"

Again the bow was drawn, and a shaft sped unerringly into the hollow orbit of Uldor's right eye. And again, after an interval, there came the almost inaudible pleading: "Archer, still another shaft."

Once more the bow of ironwood sang in the silent vault, and an arrow stood in the left eye of Uldor, quivering with the force of its propulsion. This time there was no whisper from the rotting lips: but Zobal heard a curious rustling, and a sigh as of lapsing sand. Beneath his gaze the black limbs and body crumbled swiftly, the face and head fell in, and the three arrows sagged awry, since there was naught now but a pile of dust and parting bones to hold them embedded.

LEAVING the arrows as Uldor had enjoined him to do, Zobal groped for the gray talisman that was now buried amid those fallen relics. Finding it, he hung it carefully at his belt beside the long straight sword which he carried. Perhaps, he reflected, the thing might have its use ere the night was over.

Quickly he turned away and climbed the steps to the courtyard. A saffron-yellow and lopsided moon was soaring above the wall, and he knew by this that he had been absent overlong from his vigil with Cushara. All, however, seemed tranquil: the drowsing animals had not stirred; and the monastery was dark and soundless. Seizing a full wine-skin and a bag containing such edibles as Cushara had asked him to bring, Zobal hurried back to the open hall.

Even as he passed into the building, the arras-like silence before him was burst asunder by a frightful hubbub. He distinguished amid the clamor the screaming of Rubalsa, the screeching of Simban, and the furious roaring of Cushara: but above these, as if to drown them all, an obscene laughter mounted continually, like the welling forth of dark subterrene waters thick and foul with the fats of corruption.

Zobal dropped the wine-skin and the sack of comestibles, and raced forward, unslinging his bow as he went. The outcries of his companions continued, but he heard them faintly now above the damnable incubus-like laughter that swelled as if to fill the whole monastery. As he neared the space before Rubalsa's chamber, he saw Cushara beating with the haft of his pike at a blank wall in which there was no longer a hempen-curtained doorway! Behind the wall the screeching

of Simban ceased in a gurgling moan like that of some butchered steer; but the girl's terror-sharpened cries still mounted through the smothering cachinnation.

"This wall was wrought by demons," raged the pike-bearer as he smote vainly at the smooth masonry. "I kept a faithful watch—but they built it behind me in a silence as of the dead. And a fouler work is being done in that chamber."

"Master thy frenzy," said Zobal, as he strove to regain the command of his own faculties amid the madness that threatened to overwhelm him. At that instant he recalled the oval gray touchstone of Uldor, which hung at his baldric from its black silver chain; and it came to him that the closed wall was perhaps an unreal enchantment against which the talisman might serve even as Uldor had said.

Quickly he took the touchstone in his fingers and held it to the blank surface where the doorway had been. Cushara looked on with an air of stupefaction, as if deeming the archer demented. But even as the talisman clicked faintly against it, the wall seemed to dissolve, leaving only a rude arras that fell away in tatters as if it too had been no more than a sorcerous illusion. The strange disintegration continued to spread, the whole partition melted away to a few worn blocks, and the gibbous moon shone in as the abbey of Puthuum crumbled silently to a gapped and roofless ruin!

All this had occurred in a few moments; but the warriors found no room for wonder. By the livid light of the moon, which peered down like the face of a worm-gnawed cadaver, they looked upon a scene so hideous that it caused them to forget all else. Before them, on a cracked floor from whose interstices grew desert grasses, the eunuch Simban lay sprawled in death. His raiment was torn to streamers, and blood bubbled darkly from his mangled throat. Even the leather pouches which he bore at his girdle had been ripped open, and gold coins, vials of medicine and other oddments were scattered around him.

Beyond, by the half-crumbled outer wall, Rubalsa lay in a litter of rotted cloth and woodwork which had been the gorgeously quilted ebon bed. She was trying to fend off with her lifted hands the enormously swollen shape that hung horizontally above her, as if levitated by the floating wing-like folds of its saffron robe. This shape the warriors recognized as the abbot Ujuk.

The overwelling laughter of the black incubus had ceased, and he turned upon the intruders a face contorted by diabolic lust and fury. His teeth clashed audibly, his eyes glowed in their pouches like beads of red-hot metal, as he withdrew from his position over the girl and loomed monstrously erect before her amid the ruins of the chamber.

Cushara rushed forward with leveled pike ere Zobal could fit one of his arrows to the string. But even as the pike-bearer crossed the sill, it seemed that the foully bloated form of Ujuk multiplied itself in a dozen yellow-garmented shapes that surged to meet Cushara's onset. Appearing as if by some hellish legerdemain, the monks of Puthuum had mustered to assist their abbot.

Zobal cried out in warning, but the shapes were all about Cushara, dodging the thrusts of his weapon and clawing ferociously at his plate-armor with their terrific three-inch talons. Valiantly he fought them, only to go down after a little and disappear from sight as if whelmed by a pack of ravening hyenas.

REMEMBERING the scarce-credible thing that Uldor had told him, Zobal wasted no arrows upon the monks. His bow ready, he waited for full sight of Ujuk beyond the seething rout that wran-

gled malignantly back and forth above the fallen pike-bearer. In an eddying of the pack he aimed swiftly at the looming incubus, who seemed wholly intent on that fiendish struggle, as if directing it in some wise without spoken word or ponderable gesture. Straight and true the arrow sped with an exultant singing; and good was the sorcery of Amdok, who had wrought it: for Ujuk reeled and went down, his horrid fingers tearing vainly at the shaft that was driven nigh to its fledging of eagle-quills in his body.

Now a strange thing occurred: for, as the incubus fell and writhed to and fro in his dying, the twelve monks all dropped away from Cushara, tossing convulsively on the floor as if they were but shaken shadows of the thing that died. It seemed to Zobal that their forms grew dim and diaphanous, and he saw the cracks in the flagstones beyond them; and their writhings lessened with those of Ujuk; and when Ujuk lay still at last, the faint outlines of the figures vanished as if erased from earth and air. Naught remained but the noisome bulk of that fiend who had been the progeny of the abbot Uldor and the lamia. And the bulk shrank visibly from instant to instant beneath its sagging garments, and a smell of ripe corruption arose, as if all that was human in the hellish thing were rotting swiftly away.

Cushara had scrambled to his feet and was peering about in a stunned fashion. His heavy armor had saved him from the talons of his assailants; but the armor itself was scored from greaves to helmet with innumerable scratches.

"Whither have the monks gone?" he inquired. "They were all about me an instant ago, like so many wild dogs worrying a fallen aurochs."

"The monks were but emanations of Ujuk," said Zobal. "They were mere fantasms, multiple eidola, that he sent forth and withdrew into himself at will; and they had no real existence apart from him. With Ujuk's death they have become less than shadows."

"Verily, such things are prodigious," opined the pike-bearer.

The warriors now turned their attention to Rubalsa, who had struggled to a sitting posture amid the downfallen wreckage of her bed. The tatters of rotten quilting which she clutched about her with shamefast fingers at their approach, served but little to conceal her well-rounded ivory nakedness. She wore an air of mingled fright and confusion, like a sleeper who has just awakened from some atrocious nightmare.

"Had the incubus harmed thee?" inquired Zobal anxiously. He was reassured by her faint, bewildered negative. Dropping his eyes before the piteous disarray of her girlish beauty, he felt in his heart a deeper enamorment than before, a passion touched with such tenderness as he had never known in the hot, brief loves of his hazard-haunted days. Eyeing Cushara covertly, he knew with dismay that this emotion was shared to the fullest by his comrade.

The warriors now withdrew to a little distance and turned their backs decorously while Rubalsa dressed.

"I deem," said Zobal in a low voice beyond overhearing of the girl, "that thou and I tonight have met and conquered such perils as were not contracted for in our service to Hoaraph. And I deem that we are of one mind concerning the maiden, and love her too dearly now to deliver her to the captious lust of a sated king. Therefore we cannot return to Faraad. If it please thee, we shall draw lots for the girl; and the loser will attend the winner as a true comrade till such time as we have made our way from Izdrel, and have crossed the border of some land lying beyond Hoaraph's rule."

To this Cushara agreed. When Rubalsa had finished her dressing, the two began to look about them for such objects as might serve in the proposed sortilege. Cushara would have tossed one of the gold coins, stamped with Hoaraph's image, which had rolled from Simban's torn money-bag. But Zobal shook his head at the suggestion, having espied certain items which he thought even more exquisitely appropriate than the coin. These objects were the talons of the incubus, whose corpse had now dwindled in size and was horribly decayed, with a hideous wrinkling of the whole head and an actual shortening of the members. In this process, the claws of hands and feet had all dropped away and were lying loose on the pavement. Removing his helmet, Zobal stooped down and placed within it the five hellish-looking talons of the right hand, among which that of the index finger was the longest.

He shook the helmet vigorously, as one shakes a dice-box, and there was a sharp clattering from the claws. Then he held the helmet out to Cushara, saying: "He who draws the forefinger talon shall take the girl."

Cushara put in his hand and withdrew it quickly, holding aloft the heavy thumb-nail, which was shortest of all. Zobal drew the nail of the middle finger; and Cushara, at his second trial, brought forth the little finger's claw. Then, to the deep chagrin of the pike-bearer, Zobal produced the dearly coveted index talon.

Rubalsa, who had been watching this singular procedure with open curiosity, now said to the warriors: "What are ye doing?"

Zobal started to explain, but before he had finished, the girl cried out indignantly: "Neither of ye has consulted my preference in this matter." Then, pouting prettily, she turned away from the disconcerted archer and flung her arms about the neck of Cushara.

The Devil's Swamp

By ROBERT AVRETT

The fetid swamp lies desolate by day,
  As ghostly silent as an ancient tomb;
The moss-enshrouded trees exhale decay,
  And sunlight rarely penetrates the gloom.

But after nightfall, then the swamp awakes
  And stretches like a vampire roused from sleep,
While from their lairs within the tangled brakes
  Emerge dim shapes that fly, or run, or creep.

The sound of wild, unearthly laughter rings
  Out loud beside the pestilent lagoon,
Where witches sport with slimy, crawling things;
  And distant werewolves bay beneath the moon.

"Conan wheeled and extended his hand toward the jewel."

The Hour of the Dragon

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stirring and vivid weird story about a barbarian adventurer who made himself king, and the strange talismanic jewel that was known as the Heart of Ahriman

The Story Thus Far

CONAN, a barbarian adventurer who has made himself king of Aquilonia, finds himself pitted against Xaltotun, an ancient sorcerer and adept of black magic who has been dead for three thousand years. The priests who poisoned Xaltotun had mummified his body, keeping all his organs intact. He is revived by means of a flaming

jewel, known as the Heart of Ahriman, which had been stolen from the wizard during his life.

With Xaltotun's aid, the conspirators who had brought him back from death place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia and invade Conan's kingdom. Xaltotun causes the cliffs to fall on Conan's army and captures Conan with the aid of his dark arts. Valerius, one of the conspirators, ascends the throne of Aquilonia, and Conan is mourned as dead.

Conan, rescued from Xaltotun's dungeons of horror by a girl of the king's seraglio who has fallen in love with him, escapes to Aquilonia and attempts to rally his followers; but they fear Xaltotun's magic too much. Meanwhile King Tarascus, alarmed by the growing power of the sorcerer Xaltotun, steals from him the Heart of Ahriman and sends one of his followers to throw the dread jewel into the sea.

By a heroic feat Conan rescues the Countess Albiona from the headsman's ax in the Iron Tower, and is aided in making his escape by the weird priests of Asura, whom he had befriended when he was king. Leaving the countess in safe hands, he starts for the coast, alone, in pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman. The jewel changes hands several times, and finally is taken aboard a Stygian galley by a priest of Stygia. Conan is set upon by hired assassins, and left for dead on the beach.

The story continues:

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15. The Return of the Corsair

CONAN's first sensation of returning consciousness was that of motion; under him was no solidity, but a ceaseless heaving and plunging. Then he heard wind humming through cords and spars, and knew he was aboard a ship even before his blurred sight cleared. He heard a mutter of voices and then a dash of water deluged him, jerking him sharply into full animation. He heaved up with a sulfurous curse, braced his legs and glared about him, with a burst of coarse guffaws in his ears and the reek of unwashed bodies in his nostrils.

He was standing on the poopdeck of a long galley which was running before the wind that whipped down from the north, her striped sail bellying against the taut sheets. The sun was just rising, in a dazzling blaze of gold and blue and green. To the left of the shoreline was a dim purple shadow. To the right stretched the open ocean. This much Conan saw at a glance that likewise included the ship itself.

It was long and narrow, a typical trading-ship of the southern coasts, high of poop and stern, with cabins at either extremity. Conan looked down into the open waist, whence wafted that sickening abominable odor. He knew it of old. It was the body-scent of the oarsmen, chained to their benches. They were all negroes, forty men to each side, each confined by a chain locked about his waist, with the other end welded to a heavy ring set deep in the solid runway beam that ran between the benches from stem to stern. The life of a slave aboard an Argossean galley was a hell unfathomable. Most of these were Kushites, but some thirty of the blacks who now rested on their idle oars and stared up at the stranger with dull curiosity were from the far southern isles, the homelands of the corsairs. Conan recognized them by their straighter features and hair, their rangier, cleaner-limbed build. And he saw among them men who had followed him of old.

But all this he saw and recognized in one swift, all-embracing glance as he rose, before he turned his attention to the figures about him. Reeling momentarily on braced legs, his fists clenched

wrathfully, he glared at the figures clustered about him. The sailor who had drenched him stood grinning, the empty bucket still poised in his hand, and Conan cursed him with venom, instinctively reaching for his hilt. Then he discovered that he was weaponless and naked except for his short leather breeks.

"What lousy tub is this?" he roared. "How did I come aboard here?"

The sailors laughed jeeringly—stocky, bearded Argosseans to a man—and one, whose richer dress and air of command proclaimed him captain, folded his arms and said domineeringly: "We found you lying on the sands. Somebody had rapped you on the pate and taken your clothes. Needing an extra man, we brought you aboard."

"What ship is this?" Conan demanded.

"The *Venturer,* out of Messantia, with a cargo of mirrors, scarlet silk cloaks, shields, gilded helmets and swords to trade to the Shemites for copper and gold ore. I am Demetrio, captain of this vessel and your master henceforward."

"Then I'm headed in the direction I wanted to go, after all," muttered Conan, heedless of that last remark. They were racing southeastward, following the long curve of the Argossean coast. These trading-ships never ventured far from the shoreline. Somewhere ahead of him he knew that low dark Stygian galley was speeding southward.

"Have you sighted a Stygian galley——" began Conan, but the beard of the burly, brutal-faced captain bristled. He was not in the least interested in any question his prisoner might wish to ask, and felt it high time he reduced this independent wastrel to his proper place.

"Get for'ard!" he roared. "I've wasted time enough with you! I've done you the honor of having you brought to the poop to be revived, and answered enough of your infernal questions. Get off this poop! You'll work your way aboard this galley——"

"I'll buy your ship——" began Conan, before he remembered that he was a penniless wanderer.

A roar of rough mirth greeted these words, and the captain turned purple, thinking he sensed ridicule.

"You mutinous swine!" he bellowed, taking a threatening step forward, while his hand closed on the knife at his belt. "Get for'ard before I have you flogged! You'll keep a civil tongue in your jaws, or by Mitra, I'll have you chained among the blacks to tug an oar!"

Conan's volcanic temper, never long at best, burst into explosion. Not in years, even before he was king, had a man spoken to him thus and lived.

"Don't lift your voice to me, you tar-breeched dog!" he roared in a voice as gusty as the sea-wind, while the sailors gaped dumfounded. "Draw that toy and I'll feed you to the fishes!"

"Who do you think you are?" gasped the captain.

"I'll show you!" roared the maddened Cimmerian, and he wheeled and bounded toward the rail, where weapons hung in their brackets.

The captain drew his knife and ran at him bellowing, but before he could strike, Conan gripped his wrist with a wrench that tore the arm clean out of the socket. The captain bellowed like an ox in agony, and then rolled clear across the deck as he was hurled contemptuously from his attacker. Conan ripped a heavy ax from the rail and wheeled cat-like to meet the rush of the sailors. They ran in, giving tongue like hounds, clumsy-footed and awkward in comparison to the pantherish Cimmerian. Before they could reach him with their knives he sprang among them, striking right and left too quickly for the eye to follow, and blood and brains spattered as two corpses struck the deck.

Knives flailed the air wildly as Conan broke through the stumbling, gasping mob and bounded to the narrow bridge that spanned the waist from poop to forecastle, just out of reach of the slaves below. Behind him the handful of sailors on the poop were floundering after him, daunted by the destruction of their fellows, and the rest of the crew—some thirty in all—came running across the bridge toward him, with weapons in their hands.

Conan bounded out on the bridge and stood poised above the upturned black faces, ax lifted, black mane blown in the wind.

"Who am I?" he yelled. "Look, you dogs! Look, Ajonga, Yasunga, Laranga! *Who am I?*"

And from the waist rose a shout that swelled to a mighty roar: "Amra! It is Amra! The Lion has returned!"

The sailors who caught and understood the burden of that awesome shout paled and shrank back, staring in sudden fear at the wild figure on the bridge. Was this in truth that bloodthirsty ogre of the southern seas who had so mysteriously vanished years ago, but who still lived in gory legends? The blacks were frothing crazy now, shaking and tearing at their chains and shrieking the name of Amra like an invocation. Kushites who had never seen Conan before took up the yell. The slaves in the pen under the after-cabin began to batter at the walls, shrieking like the damned.

Demetrio, hitching himself along the deck on one hand and his knees, livid with the agony of his dislocated arm, screamed: "In and kill him, dogs, before the slaves break loose!"

Fired to desperation by that word, the most dread to all galleymen, the sailors charged on to the bridge from both ends. But with a lion-like bound Conan left the bridge and hit like a cat on his feet on the runway between the benches.

"Death to the masters!" he thundered, and his ax rose and fell crashingly full on a shackle-chain, severing it like matchwood. In an instant a shrieking slave was free, splintering his oar for a bludgeon. Men were racing frantically along the bridge above, and all hell and bedlam broke loose on the *Venturer*. Conan's ax rose and fell without pause, and with every stroke a frothing, screaming black giant broke free, mad with hate and the fury of freedom and vengeance.

Sailors leaping down into the waist to grapple or smite at the naked white giant hewing like one possessed at the shackles, found themselves dragged down by hands of slaves yet unfreed, while others, their broken chains whipping and snapping about their limbs, came up out of the waist like a blind, black torrent, screaming like fiends, smiting with broken oars and pieces of iron, tearing and rending with talons and teeth. In the midst of the mêlée the slaves in the pen broke down the walls and came surging up on the decks, and with fifty blacks freed of their benches Conan abandoned his iron-hewing and bounded up on the bridge to add his notched ax to the bludgeons of his partizans.

Then it was massacre. The Argosseans were strong, sturdy, fearless like all their race, trained in the brutal school of the sea. But they could not stand against these maddened giants, led by the tigerish barbarian. Blows and abuse and hellish suffering were avenged in one red gust of fury that raged like a typhoon from one end of the ship to the other, and when it had blown itself out, but one white man lived aboard the *Venturer*, and that was the blood-stained giant about whom the chanting blacks thronged to cast themselves prostrate on the bloody

deck and beat their heads against the boards in an ecstasy of hero-worship.

Conan, his mighty chest heaving and glistening with sweat, the red ax gripped in his blood-smeared hand, glared about him as the first chief of men might have glared in some primordial dawn, and shook back his black mane. In that moment he was not king of Aquilonia; he was again lord of the black corsairs, who had hacked his way to lordship through flame and blood.

"Amra! Amra!" chanted the delirious blacks, those who were left to chant. "The Lion has returned! Now will the Stygians howl like dogs in the night, and the black dogs of Kush will howl! Now will villages burst in flames and ships founder! *Aie*, there will be wailing of women and the thunder of the spears!"

"Cease this yammering, dogs!" Conan roared in a voice that drowned the clap of the sail in the wind. "Ten of you go below and free the oarsmen who are yet chained. The rest of you man the sweeps and bend to oars and halyards. Crom's devils, don't you see we've drifted inshore during the fight? Do you want to run aground and be retaken by the Argosseans? Throw these carcasses overboard. Jump to it, you rogues, or I'll notch your hides for you!"

With shouts and laughter and wild singing they leaped to do his commands. The corpses, white and black, were hurled overboard, where triangular fins were already cutting the water.

Conan stood on the poop, frowning down at the black men who watched him expectantly. His heavy brown arms were folded, his black hair, grown long in his wanderings, blew in the wind. A wilder and more barbaric figure never trod the bridge of a ship, and in this ferocious corsair few of the courtiers of Aquilonia would have recognized their king.

"There's food in the hold!" he roared. "Weapons in plenty for you, for this ship carried blades and harness to the Shemites who dwell along the coast. There are enough of us to work ship, aye, and to fight! You rowed in chains for the Argossean dogs: will you row as free men for Amra?"

"Aye!" they roared. "We are thy children! Lead us where you will!"

"Then fall to and clean out that waist," he commanded. "Free men don't labor in such filth. Three of you come with me to break out food from the after-cabin. By Crom, I'll pad out your ribs before this cruise is done!"

Another yell of approbation answered him, as the half-starved blacks scurried to do his bidding. The sail bellied as the wind swept over the waves with renewed force, and the white crests danced along the sweep of the wind. Conan planted his feet to the heave of the deck, breathed deep and spread his mighty arms. King of Aquilonia he might no longer be; king of the blue ocean he was still.

16. Black-Walled Khemi

The *Venturer* swept southward like a living thing, her oars pulled now by free and willing hands. She had been transformed from a peaceful trader into a war-galley, insofar as the transformation was possible. Men sat at the benches now with swords at their sides and gilded helmets on their kinky heads. Shields were hung along the rails, and sheafs of spears, bows and arrows adorned the mast. Even the elements seemed to work for Conan now; the broad purple sail bellied to a stiff breeze that held day by day, needing little aid from the oars.

But though Conan kept a man on the masthead day and night, they did not sight a long, low, black galley fleeing southward ahead of them. Day by day

the blue waters rolled empty to their view, broken only by fishing-craft which fled like frightened birds before them, at sight of the shields hung along the rail. The season for trading was practically over for the year, and they sighted no other ships.

When the lookout did sight a sail, it was to the north, not the south. Far on the skyline behind them appeared a racing-galley, with full spread of purple sail. The blacks urged Conan to turn and plunder it, but he shook his head. Somewhere south of him a slim black galley was racing toward the ports of Stygia. That night, before darkness shut down, the lookout's last glimpse showed him the racing-galley on the horizon, and at dawn it was still hanging on their tail, afar off, tiny in the distance. Conan wondered if it was following him, though he could think of no logical reason for such a supposition. But he paid little heed. Each day that carried him farther southward filled him with fiercer impatience. Doubts never assailed him. As he believed in the rise and set of the sun he believed that a priest of Set had stolen the Heart of Ahriman. And where would a priest of Set carry it but to Stygia? The blacks sensed his eagerness, and toiled as they had never toiled under the lash, though ignorant of his goal. They anticipated a red career of pillage and plunder and were content. The men of the southern isles knew no other trade; and the Kushites of the crew joined whole-heartedly in the prospect of looting their own people, with the callousness of their race. Blood-ties meant little; a victorious chieftain and personal gain everything.

Soon the character of the coastline changed. No longer they sailed past steep cliffs with blue hills marching behind them. Now the shore was the edge of broad meadowlands which barely rose above the water's edge and swept away and away into the hazy distance. Here were few harbors and fewer ports, but the green plain was dotted with the cities of the Shemites; green sea, lapping the rim of the green plains, and the zikkurats of the cities gleaming whitely in the sun, some small in the distance.

Through the grazing-lands moved the herds of cattle, and squat, broad riders with cylindrical helmets and curled blue-black beards, with bows in their hands. This was the shore of the lands of Shem, where there was no law save as each city-state could enforce its own. Far to the eastward, Conan knew, the meadowlands gave way to desert, where there were no cities and the nomadic tribes roamed unhindered.

Still as they plied southward, past the changeless panorama of city-dotted meadowland, at last the scenery again began to alter. Clumps of tamarind appeared, the palm groves grew denser. The shoreline became more broken, a marching rampart of green fronds and trees, and behind them rose bare, sandy hills. Streams poured into the sea, and along their moist banks vegetation grew thick and of vast variety.

So at last they passed the mouth of a broad river that mingled its flow with the ocean, and saw the great black walls and towers of Khemi rise against the southern horizon.

The river was the Styx, the real border of Stygia. Khemi was Stygia's greatest port, and at that time her most important city. The king dwelt at more ancient Luxur, but in Khemi reigned the priestcraft; though men said the center of their dark religion lay far inland, in a mysterious, deserted city near the bank of the Styx. This river, springing from some nameless source far in the unknown lands south of Stygia, ran northward for a thousand miles before it turned and

flowed westward for some hundreds of miles, to empty at last into the ocean.

The *Venturer,* showing no lights, stole past the port in the night, and before dawn discovered her, anchored in a small bay a few miles south of the city. It was surrounded by marsh, a green tangle of mangroves, palms and lianas, swarming with crocodiles and serpents. Discovery was extremely unlikely. Conan knew the place of old; he had hidden there before, in his corsair days.

As they slid silently past the city whose great black bastions rose on the jutting prongs of land which locked the harbor, torches gleamed and smoldered luridly, and to their ears came the low thunder of drums. The port was not crowded with ships, as were the harbors of Argos. The Stygians did not base their glory and power upon ships and fleets. Trading-vessels and war-galleys, indeed, they had, but not in proportion to their inland strength. Many of their craft plied up and down the great river, rather than along the sea-coasts.

The Stygians were an ancient race, a dark, inscrutable people, powerful and merciless. Long ago their rule had stretched far north of the Styx, beyond the meadowlands of Shem, and into the fertile uplands now inhabited by the peoples of Koth and Ophir and Argos. Their borders had marched with those of ancient Acheron. But Acheron had fallen, and the barbaric ancestors of the Hyborians had swept southward in wolfskins and horned helmets, driving the ancient rulers of the land before them. The Stygians had not forgotten.

All day the *Venturer* lay at anchor in the tiny bay, walled in with green branches and tangled vines through which flitted gay-plumed, harsh-voiced birds, and among which glided bright-scaled, silent reptiles. Toward sundown a small boat crept out and down along the shore, seeking and finding that which Conan desired—a Stygian fisherman in his shallow, flat-prowed boat.

They brought him to the deck of the *Venturer*—a tall, dark, rangily built man, ashy with fear of his captors, who were ogres of that coast. He was naked except for his silken breeks, for, like the Hyrkanians, even the commoners and slaves of Stygia wore silk; and in his boat was a wide mantle such as these fishermen flung about their shoulders against the chill of the night.

He fell to his knees before Conan, expecting torture and death.

"Stand on your legs, man, and quit trembling," said the Cimmerian impatiently, who found it difficult to understand abject terror. "You won't be harmed. Tell me but this: has a galley, a black racing-galley returning from Argos, put into Khemi within the last few days?"

"Aye, my lord," answered the fisherman. "Only yesterday at dawn the priest Thutothmes returned from a voyage far to the north. Men say he has been to Messantia."

"What did he bring from Messantia?"

"Alas, my lord, I know not."

"Why did he go to Messantia?" demanded Conan.

"Nay, my lord, I am but a common man. Who am I to know the minds of the priests of Set? I can only speak what I have seen and what I have heard men whisper along the wharves. Men say that news of great import came southward, though of what none knows; and it is well known that the lord Thutothmes put off in his black galley in great haste. Now he is returned, but what he did in Argos, or what cargo he brought back, none knows, not even the seamen who manned his galley. Men say that he has

opposed Thoth-Amon, who is the master of all priests of Set, and dwells in Luxur, and that Thutothmes seeks hidden power to overthrow the Great One. But who am I to say? When priests war with one another a common man can but lie on his belly and hope neither treads upon him."

Conan snarled in nervous exasperation at this servile philosophy, and turned to his men. "I'm going alone into Khemi to find this thief Thutothmes. Keep this man prisoner, but see that you do him no hurt. Crom's devils, stop your yowling! Do you think we can sail into the harbor and take the city by storm? I must go alone."

Silencing the clamor of protests, he doffed his own garments and donned the prisoner's silk breeches and sandals, and the band from the man's hair, but scorned the short fisherman's knife. The common men of Stygia were not allowed to wear swords, and the mantle was not voluminous enough to hide the Cimmerian's long blade, but Conan buckled to his hip a Ghanata knife, a weapon borne by the fierce desert men who dwelt to the south of the Stygians, a broad, heavy, slightly curved blade of fine steel, edged like a razor and long enough to dismember a man.

Then, leaving the Stygian guarded by the corsairs, Conan climbed into the fisher's boat.

"Wait for me until dawn," he said. "If I haven't come then, I'll never come, so hasten southward to your own homes."

As he clambered over the rail, they set up a doleful wail at his going, until he thrust his head back into sight to curse them into silence. Then, dropping into the boat, he grasped the oars and sent the tiny craft shooting over the waves more swiftly than its owner had ever propelled it.

17. "He Has Slain the Sacred Son of Set!"

THE harbor of Khemi lay between two great jutting points of land that ran into the ocean. He rounded the southern point, where the great black castles rose like a man-made hill, and entered the harbor just at dusk, when there was still enough light for the watchers to recognize the fisherman's boat and mantle, but not enough to permit recognition of betraying details. Unchallenged he threaded his way among the great black war galleys lying silent and unlighted at anchor, and drew up to a flight of wide stone steps which mounted up from the water's edge. There he made his boat fast to an iron ring set in the stone, as numerous similar craft were tied. There was nothing strange in a fisherman leaving his boat there. None but a fisherman could find a use for such a craft, and they did not steal from one another.

No one cast him more than a casual glance as he mounted the long steps, unobtrusively avoiding the torches that flared at intervals above the lapping black water. He seemed but an ordinary, empty-handed fisherman, returning after a fruitless day along the coast. If one had observed him closely, it might have seemed that his step was somewhat too springy and sure, his carriage somewhat too erect and confident for a lowly fisherman. But he passed quickly, keeping in the shadows, and the commoners of Stygia were no more given to analysis than were the commoners of the less exotic races.

In build he was not unlike the warrior castes of the Stygians, who were a tall, muscular race. Bronzed by the sun, he was nearly as dark as many of them. His black hair, square-cut and confined by a copper band, increased the resemblance. The characteristics which set him apart

from them were the subtle difference in his walk, and his alien features and blue eyes.

But the mantle was a good disguise, and he kept as much in the shadows as possible, turning away his head when a native passed him too closely.

But it was a desperate game, and he knew he could not long keep up the deception. Khemi was not like the seaports of the Hyborians, where types of every race swarmed. The only aliens here were negro and Shemite slaves; and he resembled neither even as much as he resembled the Stygians themselves. Strangers were not welcome in the cities of Stygia; tolerated only when they came as ambassadors or licensed traders. But even then the latter were not allowed ashore after dark. And now there were no Hyborian ships in the harbor at all. A strange restlessness ran through the city, a stirring of ancient ambitions, a whispering none could define except those who whispered. This Conan felt rather than knew, his whetted primitive instincts sensing unrest about him.

If he were discovered his fate would be ghastly. They would slay him merely for being a stranger; if he were recognized as Amra, the corsair chief who had swept their coasts with steel and flame—an involuntary shudder twitched Conan's broad shoulders. Human foes he did not fear, nor any death by steel or fire. But this was a black land of sorcery and nameless horror. Set the Old Serpent, men said, banished long ago from the Hyborian races, yet lurked in the shadows of the cryptic temples, and awful and mysterious were the deeds done in the nighted shrines.

He had drawn away from the waterfront streets with their broad steps leading down to the water, and was entering the long shadowy streets of the main part of the city. There was no such scene as was offered by any Hyborian city—no blaze of lamps and cressets, with gay-clad people laughing and strolling along the pavements, and shops and stalls wide open and displaying their wares.

Here the stalls were closed at dusk. The only lights along the streets were torches, flaring smokily at wide intervals. People walking the streets were comparatively few; they went hurriedly and unspeaking, and their numbers decreased with the lateness of the hour. Conan found the scene gloomy and unreal; the silence of the people, their furtive haste, the great black stone walls that rose on each side of the streets. There was a grim massiveness about Stygian architecture that was overpowering and oppressive.

Few lights showed anywhere except in the upper parts of the buildings. Conan knew that most of the people lay on the flat roofs, among the palms of artificial gardens under the stars. There was a murmur of weird music from somewhere. Occasionally a bronze chariot rumbled along the flags, and there was a brief glimpse of a tall, hawk-faced noble, with a silk cloak wrapped about him, and a gold band with a rearing serpent-head emblem confining his black mane; of the ebon, naked charioteer bracing his knotty legs against the straining of the fierce Stygian horses.

But the people who yet traversed the streets on foot were commoners, slaves, tradesmen, harlots, toilers, and they became fewer as he progressed. He was making toward the temple of Set, where he knew he would be likely to find the priest he sought. He believed he would know Thutothmes if he saw him, though his one glance had been in the semi-darkness of the Messantian alley. That the man he had seen there had been the priest he was certain. Only occultists high in the mazes of the hideous Black Ring pos-

sessed the power of the black hand that dealt death by its touch; and only such a man would dare defy Thoth-Amon, whom the western world knew only as a figure of terror and myth.

THE street broadened, and Conan was aware that he was getting into the part of the city dedicated to the temples. The great structures reared their black bulks against the dim stars, grim, indescribably menacing in the flare of the few torches. And suddenly he heard a low scream from a woman on the other side of the street and somewhat ahead of him —a naked courtezan wearing the tall plumed head-dress of her class. She was shrinking back against the wall, staring across at something he could not yet see. At her cry the few people on the street halted suddenly as if frozen. At the same instant Conan was aware of a sinister slithering ahead of him. Then about the dark corner of the building he was approaching poked a hideous, wedge-shaped head, and after it flowed coil after coil of rippling, darkly glistening trunk.

The Cimmerian recoiled, remembering tales he had heard—serpents were sacred to Set, god of Stygia, who men said was himself a serpent. Monsters such as this were kept in the temples of Set, and when they hungered, were allowed to crawl forth into the streets to take what prey they wished. Their ghastly feasts were considered a sacrifice to the scaly god.

The Stygians within Conan's sight fell to their knees, men and women, and passively awaited their fate. One the great serpent would select, would lap in scaly coils, crush to a red pulp and swallow as a rat-snake swallows a mouse. The others would live. That was the will of the gods.

But it was not Conan's will. The python glided toward him, its attention probably attracted by the fact that he was the only human in sight still standing erect. Gripping his great knife under his mantle, Conan hoped the slimy brute would pass him by. But it halted before him and reared up horrifically in the flickering torchlight, its forked tongue flickering in and out, its cold eyes glittering with the ancient cruelty of the serpent-folk. Its neck arched, but before it could dart, Conan whipped his knife from under his mantle and struck like a flicker of lightning. The broad blade split that wedge-shaped head and sheared deep into the thick neck.

Conan wrenched his knife free and sprang clear as the great body knotted and looped and whipped terrifically in its death throes. In the moment that he stood staring in morbid fascination, the only sound was the thud and swish of the snake's tail against the stones.

Then from the shocked votaries burst a terrible cry: "Blasphemer! He has slain the sacred son of Set! Slay him! Slay! Slay!"

Stones whizzed about him and the crazed Stygians rushed at him, shrieking hysterically, while from all sides others emerged from their houses and took up the cry. With a curse Conan wheeled and darted into the black mouth of an alley. He heard the patter of bare feet on the flags behind him as he ran more by feel than by sight, and the walls resounded to the vengeful yells of the pursuers. Then his left hand found a break in the wall, and he turned sharply into another, narrower alley. On both sides rose sheer black stone walls. High above him he could see a thin line of stars. These giant walls, he knew, were the walls of temples. He heard, behind him, the pack sweep past the dark mouth in full cry. Their shouts grew distant, faded away. They had missed the smaller alley and run straight on in the blackness. He too

kept straight ahead, though the thought of encountering another of Set's "sons" in the darkness brought a shudder from him.

Then somewhere ahead of him he caught a moving glow, like that of a crawling glow-worm. He halted, flattened himself against the wall and gripped his knife. He knew what it was: a man approaching with a torch. Now it was so close he could make out the dark hand that gripped it, and the dim oval of a dark face. A few more steps and the man would certainly see him. He sank into a tigerish crouch—the torch halted. A door was briefly etched in the glow, while the torch-bearer fumbled with it. Then it opened, the tall figure vanished through it, and darkness closed again on the alley. There was a sinister suggestion of furtiveness about that slinking figure, entering the alley-door in darkness; a priest, perhaps, returning from some dark errand.

But Conan groped toward the door. If one man came up that alley with a torch, others might come at any time. To retreat the way he had come might mean to run full into the mob from which he was fleeing. At any moment they might return, find the narrower alley and come howling down it. He felt hemmed in by those sheer, unscalable walls, desirous of escape, even if escape meant invading some unknown building.

The heavy bronze door was not locked. It opened under his fingers and he peered through the crack. He was looking into a great square chamber of massive black stone. A torch smoldered in a niche in the wall. The chamber was empty. He glided through the lacquered door and closed it behind him.

His sandaled feet made no sound as he crossed the black marble floor. A teak door stood partly open, and gliding through this, knife in hand, he came out into a great, dim, shadowy place whose lofty ceiling was only a hint of darkness high above him, toward which the black walls swept upward. On all sides black-arched doorways opened into the great still hall. It was lit by curious bronze lamps that gave a dim weird light. On the other side of the great hall a broad black marble stairway, without a railing, marched upward to lose itself in gloom, and above him on all sides dim galleries hung like black stone ledges.

Conan shivered; he was in a temple of some Stygian god, if not Set himself, then someone only less grim. And the shrine did not lack an occupant. In the midst of the great hall stood a black stone altar, massive, somber, without carvings or ornament, and upon it coiled one of the great sacred serpents, its iridescent scales shimmering in the lamplight. It did not move, and Conan remembered stories that the priests kept these ceatures drugged part of the time. The Cimmerian took an uncertain step out from the door, then shrank back suddenly, not into the room he had just quitted, but into a velvet-curtained recess. He had heard a soft step somewhere near by.

From one of the black arches emerged a tall, powerful figure in sandals and silken loin-cloth, with a wide mantle trailing from his shoulders. But face and head were hidden by a monstrous mask, a half-bestial, half-human countenance, from the crest of which floated a mass of ostrich plumes.

In certain ceremonies the Stygian priests went masked. Conan hoped the man would not discover him, but some instinct warned the Stygian. He turned abruptly from his destination, which apparently was the stair, and stepped straight to the recess. As he jerked aside the velvet hanging, a hand darted from the shadows, crushed the cry in his throat

and jerked him headlong into the alcove, and the knife impaled him.

Conan's next move was the obvious one suggested by logic. He lifted off the grinning mask and drew it over his own head. The fisherman's mantle he flung over the body of the priest, which he concealed behind the hangings, and drew the priestly mantle about his own brawny shoulders. Fate had given him a disguise. All Khemi might well be searching now for the blasphemer who dared defend himself against a sacred snake; but who would dream of looking for him under the mask of a priest?

He strode boldly from the alcove and headed for one of the arched doorways at random; but he had not taken a dozen strides when he wheeled again, all his senses edged for peril.

A band of masked figures filed down the stair, appareled exactly as he was. He hesitated, caught in the open, and stood still, trusting to his disguise, though cold sweat gathered on his forehead and the backs of his hands. No word was spoken. Like phantoms they descended into the great hall and moved past him toward a black arch. The leader carried an ebon staff which supported a grinning white skull, and Conan knew it was one of the ritualistic processions so inexplicable to a foreigner, but which played a strong —and often sinister—part in the Stygian religion. The last figure turned his head slightly toward the motionless Cimmerian, as if expecting him to follow. Not to do what was obviously expected of him would rouse instant suspicion. Conan fell in behind the last man and suited his gait to their measured pace.

They traversed a long, dark, vaulted corridor in which, Conan noticed uneasily, the skull on the staff glowed phosphorescently. He felt a surge of unreasoning, wild animal panic that urged him to rip out his knife and slash right and left at these uncanny figures, to flee madly from this grim, dark temple. But he held himself in check, fighting down the dim monstrous intuitions that rose in the back of his mind and peopled the gloom with shadowy shapes of horror; and presently he barely stifled a sigh of relief as they filed through a great double-valved door which was three times higher than a man, and emerged into the starlight.

Conan wondered if he dared fade into some dark alley; but hesitated, uncertain, and down the long dark street they padded silently, while such folk as they met turned their heads away and fled from them. The procession kept far out from the walls; to turn and bolt into any of the alleys they passed would be too conspicuous. While he mentally fumed and cursed, they came to a low-arched gateway in the southern wall, and through this they filed. Ahead of them and about them lay clusters of low, flat-topped mud houses, and palm-groves, shadowy in the starlight. Now if ever, thought Conan, was his time to escape his silent companions.

But the moment the gate was left behind them those companions were no longer silent. They began to mutter excitedly among themselves. The measured, ritualistic gait was abandoned, the staff with its skull was tucked unceremoniously under the leader's arm, and the whole group broke ranks and hurried onward. And Conan hurried with them. For in the low murmur of speech he had caught a word that galvanized him. The word was: *"Thutothmes!"*

18. "I Am the Woman Who Never Died"

CONAN stared with burning interest at his masked companions. One of them was Thutothmes, or else the destination of the band was a rendezvous with the man he sought. And he knew

what that destination was, when beyond the palms he glimpsed a black triangular bulk looming against the shadowy sky.

They passed through the belt of huts and groves, and if any man saw them he was careful not to show himself. The huts were dark. Behind them the black towers of Khemi rose gloomily against the stars that were mirrored in the waters of the harbor; ahead of them the desert stretched away in dim darkness; somewhere a jackal yapped. The quick-passing sandals of the silent neophytes made no noise in the sand. They might have been ghosts, moving toward that colossal pyramid that rose out of the murk of the desert. There was no sound over all the sleeping land.

Conan's heart beat quicker as he gazed at the grim black wedge that stood etched against the stars, and his impatience to close with Thutothmes in whatever conflict the meeting might mean was not unmixed with a fear of the unknown. No man could approach one of those somber piles of black stone without apprehension. The very name was a symbol of repellent horror among the northern nations, and legends hinted that the Stygians did not build them; that they were in the land at whatever immeasurably ancient date the dark-skinned people came into the land of the great river.

As they approached the pyramid he glimpsed a dim glow near the base which presently resolved itself into a doorway, on either side of which brooded stone lions with the heads of women, cryptic, inscrutable, nightmares crystallized in stone. The leader of the band made straight for the doorway, in the deep well of which Conan saw a shadowy figure.

The leader paused an instant beside this dim figure, and then vanished into the dark interior, and one by one the others followed. As each masked priest passed through the gloomy portal he was halted briefly by the mysterious guardian and something passed between them, some word or gesture Conan could not make out. Seeing this, the Cimmerian purposely lagged behind, and stooping, pretended to be fumbling with the fastening of his sandal. Not until the last of the masked figures had disappeared did he straighten and approach the portal.

He was uneasily wondering if the guardian of the temple were human, remembering some tales he had heard. But his doubts were set at rest. A dim bronze cresset glowing just within the door lighted a long narrow corridor that ran away into blackness, and a man standing silent in the mouth of it, wrapped in a wide black cloak. No one else was in sight. Obviously the masked priests had disappeared down the corridor.

Over the cloak that was drawn about his lower features, the Stygian's piercing eyes regarded Conan sharply. With his left hand he made a curious gesture. On a venture Conan imitated it. But evidently another gesture was expected; the Stygian's right hand came from under his cloak with a gleam of steel and his murderous stab would have pierced the heart of an ordinary man.

But he was dealing with one whose thews were nerved to the quickness of a jungle cat. Even as the dagger flashed in the dim light, Conan caught the dusky wrist and smashed his clenched right fist against the Stygian's jaw. The man's head went back against the stone wall with a dull crunch that told of a fractured skull.

Standing for an instant above him, Conan listened intently. The cresset burned low, casting vague shadows about the door. Nothing stirred in the blackness beyond, though far away and below him, as it seemed, he caught the faint, muffled note of a gong.

He stooped and dragged the body behind the great bronze door which stood wide, opened inward, and then the Cimmerian went warily but swiftly down the corridor, toward what doom he did not even try to guess.

He had not gone far when he halted, baffled. The corridor split in two branches, and he had no way of knowing which the masked priests had taken. At a venture he chose the left. The floor slanted slightly downward and worn smooth as by many feet. Here and there a dim cresset cast a faint nightmarish twilight. Conan wondered uneasily for what purpose these colossal piles had been reared, in what forgotten age. This was an ancient, ancient land. No man knew how many ages the black temples of Stygia had looked against the stars.

Narrow black arches opened occasionally to right and left, but he kept to the main corridor, although a conviction that he had taken the wrong branch was growing in him. Even with their start of him, he should have overtaken the priests by this time. He was growing nervous. The silence was like a tangible thing, and yet he had a feeling that he was not alone. More than once, passing a nighted arch he seemed to feel the glare of unseen eyes fixed upon him. He paused, half minded to turn back to where the corridor had first branched. He wheeled abruptly, knife lifted, every nerve tingling.

A GIRL stood at the mouth of a smaller tunnel, staring fixedly at him. Her ivory skin showed her to be a Stygian of some ancient noble family, and like all such women she was tall, lithe, voluptuously figured, her hair a great pile of black foam, among which gleamed a sparkling ruby. But for her velvet sandals and a broad jewel-crusted girdle about her supple waist she was quite nude.

"What do you here?" she demanded.

To answer would betray his alien origin. He remained motionless, a grim, somber figure in the hideous mask with the plumes floating over him. His alert gaze sought the shadows behind her and found them empty. But there might be hordes of fighting-men within her call.

She advanced toward him, apparently without apprehension though with suspicion.

"You are not a priest," she said. "You are a fighting-man. Even with that mask that is plain. There is as much difference between you and a priest as there is between a man and a woman. By Set!" she exclaimed, halting suddenly, her eyes flaring wide. "I do not believe you are even a Stygian!"

With a movement too quick for the eye to follow, his hand closed about her round throat, lightly as a caress.

"Not a sound out of you!" he muttered.

Her smooth ivory flesh was cold as marble, yet there was no fear in the wide, dark, marvelous eyes which regarded him.

"Do not fear," she answered calmly. "I will not betray you. But are you mad to come, a stranger and a foreigner, to the forbidden temple of Set?"

"I'm looking for the priest Thutothmes," he answered. "Is he in this temple?"

"Why do you seek him?" she parried.

"He has something of mine which was stolen."

"I will lead you to him," she volunteered, so promptly that his suspicions were instantly roused.

"Don't play with me, girl," he growled.

"I do not play with you. I have no love for Thutothmes."

He hesitated, then made up his mind; after all, he was as much in her power as she was in his.

"Walk beside me," he commanded, shifting his grasp from her throat to her wrist. "But walk with care. If you make a suspicious move——"

She led him down the slanting corridor, down and down, until there were no more cressets, and he groped his way in darkness, aware less by sight than by feel and sense of the woman at his side. Once when he spoke to her, she turned her head toward him and he was startled to see her eyes glowing like golden fire in the dark. Dim doubts and vague monstrous suspicions haunted his mind, but he followed her, through a labyrinthine maze of black corridors that confused even his primitive sense of direction. He mentally cursed himself for a fool, allowing himself to be led into that black abode of mystery; but it was too late to turn back now. Again he felt life and movement in the darkness about him, sensed peril and hunger burning impatiently in the blackness. Unless his ears deceived him he caught a faint sliding noise that ceased and receded at a muttered command from the girl.

She led him at last into a chamber lighted by a curious seven-branched candelabrum in which black candles burned weirdly. He knew they were far below the earth. The chamber was square, with walls and ceiling of polished black marble and furnished after the manner of the ancient Stygians; there was a couch of ebony, covered with black velvet, and on a black stone dais lay a carven mummy-case.

Conan stood waiting expectantly, staring at the various black arches which opened into the chamber. But the girl made no move to go farther. Stretching herself on the couch with feline suppleness, she intertwined her fingers behind her sleek head and regarded him from under long, drooping lashes.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. "What are you doing? Where's Thutothmes?"

"There is no haste," she answered lazily. "What is an hour—or a day, or a year, or a century, for that matter? Take off your mask. Let me see your features."

With a grunt of annoyance Conan dragged off the bulky headpiece, and the girl nodded as if in approval as she scanned his dark scarred face and blazing eyes.

"There is strength in you — great strength; you could strangle a bullock."

He moved restlessly, his suspicion growing. With his hand on his hilt he peered into the gloomy arches.

"If you've brought me into a trap," he said, "you won't live to enjoy your handiwork. Are you going to get off that couch and do as you promised, or do I have to——"

His voice trailed away. He was staring at the mummy-case, on which the countenance of the occupant was carved in ivory with the startling vividness of a forgotten art. There was a disquieting familiarity about that carven mask, and with something of a shock he realized what it was; there was a startling resemblance between it and the face of the girl lolling on the ebon couch. She might have been the model from which it was carved, but he knew the portrait was at least centuries old. Archaic hieroglyphics were scrawled across the lacquered lid, and, seeking back into his mind for tag-ends of learning, picked up here and there as incidentals of an adventurous life, he spelled them out, and said aloud: "Akivasha!"

"You have heard of Princess Akivasha?" inquired the girl on the couch.

"Who hasn't?" he grunted. The name of that ancient, evil, beautiful princess still lived the world over in song and legend, though ten thousand years had rolled their cycles since the daughter of

Tuthamon had reveled in purple feasts amid the black halls of ancient Luxur.

"Her only sin was that she loved life and all the meanings of life," said the Stygian girl. "To win life she courted death. She could not bear to think of growing old and shriveled and worn, and dying at last as hags die. She wooed Darkness like a lover and his gift was life —life that, not being life as mortals know it, can never grow old and fade. She went into the shadows to cheat age and death——"

CONAN glared at her with eyes that were suddenly burning slits. And he wheeled and tore the lid from the sarcophagus. It was empty. Behind him the girl was laughing and the sound froze the blood in his veins. He whirled back to her, the short hairs on his neck bristling.

"*You* are Akivasha!" he grated.

She laughed and shook back her burnished locks, spread her arms sensuously.

"I am Akivasha! I am the woman who never died, who never grew old! Who fools say was lifted from the earth by the gods, in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, to queen it for ever in some celestial clime! Nay, it is in the shadows that mortals find immortality! Ten thousand years ago I died to live for ever! Give me your lips, strong man!"

Rising lithely she came to him, rose on tiptoe and flung her arms about his massive neck. Scowling down into her upturned, beautiful countenance he was aware of a fearful fascination and an icy fear.

"Love me!" she whispered, her head thrown back, eyes closed and lips parted. "Give me of your blood to renew my youth and perpetuate my everlasting life! I will make you, too, immortal! I will teach you the wisdom of all the ages, all the secrets that have lasted out the eons in the blackness beneath these dark temples. I will make you king of that shadowy horde which revel among the tombs of the ancients when night veils the desert and bats flit across the moon. I am weary of priests and magicians, and captive girls dragged screaming through the portals of death. I desire a man. Love me, barbarian!"

She pressed her dark head down against his mighty breast, and he felt a sharp pang at the base of his throat. With a curse he tore her away and flung her sprawling across the couch.

"Damned vampire!" Blood was trickling from a tiny wound in his throat.

She reared up on the couch like a serpent poised to strike, all the golden fires of hell blazing in her wide eyes. Her lips drew back, revealing white pointed teeth.

"Fool!" she shrieked. "Do you think to escape me? You will live and die in darkness! I have brought you far below the temple. You can never find your way out alone. You can never cut your way through those which guard the tunnels. But for my protection the sons of Set would long ago have taken you into their bellies. Fool, I shall yet drink your blood!"

"Keep away from me or I'll slash you asunder," he grunted, his flesh crawling with revulsion. "You may be immortal, but steel will dismember you."

As he backed toward the arch through which he had entered, the light went out suddenly. All the candles were extinguished at once, though he did not know how; for Akivasha had not touched them. But the vampire's laugh rose mockingly behind him, poison-sweet as the viols of hell, and he sweated as he groped in the darkness for the arch in a near-panic. His fingers encountered an opening and he plunged through it. Whether it was the arch through which

he had entered he did not know, nor did he very much care. His one thought was to get out of the haunted chamber which had housed that beautiful, hideous, undead fiend for so many centuries.

His wanderings through those black, winding tunnels were a sweating nightmare. Behind him and about him he heard faint slitherings and glidings, and once the echo of that sweet, hellish laughter he had heard in the chamber of Akivasha. He slashed ferociously at sounds and movements he heard or imagined he heard in the darkness near him, and once his sword cut through some yielding tenuous substance that might have been cobwebs. He had a desperate feeling that he was being played with, lured deeper and deeper into ultimate night, before being set upon by demoniac talon and fang.

And through his fear ran the sickening revulsion of his discovery. The legend of Akivasha was so old, and among the evil tales told of her ran a thread of beauty and idealism, of everlasting youth. To so many dreamers and poets and lovers she was not alone the evil princess of Stygian legend, but the symbol of eternal youth and beauty, shining for ever in some far realm of the gods. And this was the hideous reality. This foul perversion was the truth of that everlasting life. Through his physical revulsion ran the sense of a shattered dream of man's idolatry, its glittering gold proved slime and cosmic filth. A wave of futility swept over him, a dim fear of the falseness of all men's dreams and idolatries.

And now he knew that his ears were not playing him tricks. He was being followed, and his pursuers were closing in on him. In the darkness sounded shufflings and slidings that were never made by human feet; no, nor by the feet of any normal animal. The underworld had its bestial life too, perhaps. They were behind him. He turned to face them, though he could see nothing, and slowly backed away. Then the sounds ceased, even before he turned his head and saw, somewhere down the long corridor, a glow of light.

19. In the Hall of the Dead

CONAN moved cautiously in the direction of the light he had seen, his ear cocked over his shoulder, but there was no further sound of pursuit, though he *felt* the darkness pregnant with sentient life.

The glow was not stationary; it moved, bobbing grotesquely along. Then he saw the source. The tunnel he was traversing crossed another, wider corridor some distance ahead of him. And along this latter tunnel filed a bizarre procession—four tall, gaunt men in black, hooded robes, leaning on staffs. The leader held a torch above his head—a torch that burned with a curious steady glow. Like phantoms they passed across his limited range of vision and vanished, with only a fading glow to tell of their passing. Their appearance was indescribably eldritch. They were not Stygians, not like anything Conan had ever seen. He doubted if they were even humans. They were like black ghosts, stalking ghoulishly along the haunted tunnels.

But his position could be no more desperate than it was. Before the inhuman feet behind him could resume their slithering advance at the fading of the distant illumination, Conan was running down the corridor. He plunged into the other tunnel and saw, far down it, small in the distance, the weird procession moving in the glowing sphere. He stole noiselessly after them, then shrank suddenly back against the wall as he saw them halt and cluster together as if conferring on some matter. They turned as

if to retrace their steps, and he slipped into the nearest archway. Groping in the darkness to which he had become so accustomed that he could all but see through it, he discovered that the tunnel did not run straight, but meandered, and he fell back beyond the first turn, so that the light of the strangers should not fall on him as they passed.

But as he stood there, he was aware of a low hum of sound from somewhere behind him, like the murmur of human voices. Moving down the corridor in that direction, he confirmed his first suspicion. Abandoning his original intention of following the ghoulish travelers to whatever destination might be theirs, he set out in the direction of the voices.

Presently he saw a glint of light ahead of him, and turning into the corridor from which it issued, saw a broad arch filled with a dim glow at the other end. On his left a narrow stone stair went upward, and instinctive caution prompted him to turn and mount that stair. The voices he heard were coming from beyond that flame-filled arch.

The sounds fell away beneath him as he climbed, and presently he came out through a low arched door into a vast open space glowing with a weird radiance.

He was standing on a shadowy gallery from which he looked down into a broad dim-lit hall of colossal proportions. It was a hall of the dead, which few ever see but the silent priests of Stygia. Along the black walls rose tier above tier of carven, painted sarcophagi. Each stood in a niche in the dusky stone, and the tiers mounted up and up to be lost in the gloom above. Thousands of carven masks stared impassively down upon the group in the midst of the hall, rendered futile and insignificant by that vast array of the dead.

Of this group ten were priests, and though they had discarded their masks Conan knew they were the priests he had accompanied to the pyramid. They stood before a tall, hawk-faced man beside a black altar on which lay a mummy in rotting swathings. And the altar seemed to stand in the heart of a living fire which pulsed and shimmered, dripping flakes of quivering golden flame on the black stones about it. This dazzling glow emanated from a great red jewel which lay upon the altar, and in the reflection of which the faces of the priests looked ashy and corpse-like. As he looked, Conan felt the pressure of all the weary leagues and the weary nights and days of his long quest, and he trembled with the mad urge to rush among those silent priests, clear his way with mighty blows of naked steel, and grasp the red gem with passion-taut fingers. But he gripped himself with iron control, and crouched down in the shadow of the stone balustrade. A glance showed him that a stair led down into the hall from the gallery, hugging the wall and half hidden in the shadows. He glared into the dimness of the vast place, seeking other priests or votaries, but saw only the group about the altar.

IN THAT great emptiness the voice of the man beside the altar sounded hollow and ghostly:

". . . And so the word came southward. The night wind whispered it, the ravens croaked of it as they flew, and the grim bats told it to the owls and the serpents that lurk in hoary ruins. Werewolf and vampire knew, and the ebon-bodied demons that prowl by night. The sleeping Night of the World stirred and shook its heavy mane, and there began a throbbing of drums in deep darkness, and the echoes of far weird cries frightened men who walked by dusk. For the Heart

of Ahriman had come again into the world to fulfill its cryptic destiny.

"Ask me not how I, Thutothmes of Khemi and the Night, heard the word before Thoth-Amon who calls himself prince of all wizards. There are secrets not meet for such ears even as yours, and Thoth-Amon is not the only lord of the Black Ring.

"I knew, and I went to meet the Heart which came southward. It was like a magnet which drew me, unerringly. From death to death it came, riding on a river of human blood. Blood feeds it, blood draws it. Its power is greatest when there is blood on the hands that grasp it, when it is wrested by slaughter from its holder. Wherever it gleams, blood is spilt and kingdoms totter, and the forces of nature are put in turmoil.

"And here I stand, the master of the Heart, and have summoned you to come secretly, who are faithful to me, to share in the black kingdom that shall be. Tonight you shall witness the breaking of Thoth-Amon's chains which enslave us, and the birth of empire.

"Who am I, even I, Thutothmes, to know what powers lurk and dream in those crimson deeps? It holds secrets forgotten for three thousand years. But I shall learn. These shall tell me!"

He waved his hand toward the silent shapes that lined the hall.

"See how they sleep, staring through their carven masks! Kings, queens, generals, priests, wizards, the dynasties and the nobility of Stygia for ten thousand years! The touch of the Heart will awaken them from their long slumber. Long, long the Heart throbbed and pulsed in ancient Stygia. Here was its home in the centuries before it journeyed to Acheron. The ancients knew its full powers, and they will tell me when by its magic I restore them to life to labor for me.

"I will rouse them, will waken them, will learn their forgotten wisdom, the knowledge locked in those withered skulls. By the lore of the dead we shall enslave the living! Aye, kings and generals and wizards of eld shall be our helpers and our slaves. Who shall stand before us?

"Look! This dried, shriveled thing on the altar was once Thothmekri, a high priest of Set, who died three thousand years ago. He was an adept of the Black Ring. He knew of the Heart. He will tell us of its powers."

Lifting the great jewel, the speaker laid it on the withered breast of the mummy, and lifted his hand as he began an incantation. But the incantation was never finished. With his hand lifted and his lips parted he froze, glaring past his acolytes, and they wheeled to stare in the direction in which he was looking.

Through the black arch of a door four gaunt, black-robed shapes had filed into the great hall. Their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadow of their hoods.

"Who are you?" ejaculated Thutothmes in a voice as pregnant with danger as the hiss of a cobra. "Are you mad, to invade the holy shrine of Set?"

The tallest of the strangers spoke, and his voice was toneless as a Khitan temple bell.

"We follow Conan of Aquilonia."

"He is not here," answered Thutothmes, shaking back his mantle from his right hand with a curious menacing gesture, like a panther unsheathing his talons.

"You lie. He is in this temple. We tracked him from a corpse behind the bronze door of the outer portal through a maze of corridors. We were following his devious trail when we became aware of this conclave. We go now to take it up again. But first give us the Heart of Ahriman."

"Death is the portion of madmen,"

murmured Thutothmes, moving nearer the speaker. His priests closed in on catlike feet, but the strangers did not appear to heed.

"Who can look upon it without desire?" said the Khitan. "In Khitai we have heard of it. It will give us power over the people which cast us out. Glory and wonder dream in its crimson deeps. Give it to us, before we slay you."

A fierce cry rang out as a priest leaped with a flicker of steel. Before he could strike, a scaly staff licked out and touched his breast, and he fell as a dead man falls. In an instant the mummies were staring down on a scene of blood and horror. Curved knives flashed and crimsoned, snaky staffs licked in and out, and whenever they touched a man, that man screamed and died.

At the first stroke Conan had bounded up and was racing down the stairs. He caught only glimpses of that brief, fiendish fight—saw men swaying, locked in battle and streaming blood; saw one Khitan, fairly hacked to pieces, yet still on his feet and dealing death, when Thutothmes smote him on the breast with his open, empty hand, and he dropped dead, though naked steel had not been enough to destroy his uncanny vitality.

By the time Conan's hurtling feet left the stair, the fight was all but over. Three of the Khitans were down, slashed and cut to ribbons and disemboweled, but of the Stygians only Thutothmes remained on his feet.

He rushed at the remaining Khitan, his empty hand lifted like a weapon, and that hand was black as that of a negro. But before he could strike, the staff in the tall Khitan's hand licked out, seeming to elongate itself as the yellow man thrust. The point touched the bosom of Thutothmes and he staggered; again and yet again the staff licked out, and Thutothmes reeled and fell dead, his features blotted out in a rush of blackness that made the whole of him the same hue as his enchanted hand.

THE Khitan turned toward the jewel that burned on the breast of the mummy, but Conan was before him.

In a tense stillness the two faced each other, amid that shambles, with the carven mummies staring down upon them.

"Far have I followed you, oh king of Aquilonia," said the Khitan calmly. "Down the long river, and over the mountains, across Poitain and Zingara and through the hills of Argos and down the coast. Not easily did we pick up your trail from Tarantia, for the priests of Asura are crafty. We lost it in Zingara, but we found your helmet in the forest below the border hills, where you had fought with the ghouls of the forests. Almost we lost the trail again tonight among these labyrinths."

Conan reflected that he had been fortunate in returning from the vampire's chamber by another route than that by which he had been led to it. Otherwise he would have run full into these yellow fiends instead of sighting them from afar as they smelled out his spoor like human bloodhounds, with whatever uncanny gift was theirs.

The Khitan shook his head slightly, as if reading his mind.

"That is meaningless; the long trail ends here."

"Why have you hounded me?" demanded Conan, poised to move in any direction with the celerity of a hair-trigger.

"It was a debt to pay," answered the Khitan. "To you who are about to die I will not withhold knowledge. We were vassals of the king of Aquilonia, Valerius. Long we served him, but of that

service we are free now—my brothers by death, and I by the fulfilment of obligation. I shall return to Aquilonia with two hearts; for myself the Heart of Ahriman; for Valerius the heart of Conan. A kiss of the staff that was cut from the living Tree of Death——"

The staff licked out like the dart of a viper, but the slash of Conan's knife was quicker. The staff fell in writhing halves, there was another flicker of the keen steel like a jet of lightning, and the head of the Khitan rolled to the floor.

Conan wheeled and extended his hand toward the jewel—then he shrank back, his hair bristling, his blood congealing icily.

For no longer a withered brown thing lay on the altar. The jewel shimmered on the full, arching breast of a naked, living man who lay among the moldering bandages. Living? Conan could not decide. The eyes were like dark murky glass under which shone inhuman somber fires.

Slowly the man rose, taking the jewel in his hand. He towered beside the altar, dusky, naked, with a face like a carven image. Mutely he extended his hand toward Conan, with the jewel throbbing like a living heart within it. Conan took it, with an eery sensation of receiving gifts from the hand of the dead. He somehow realized that the proper incantations had not been made—the conjurement had not been completed—life had not been fully restored to this corpse.

"Who are you?" demanded the Cimmerian.

The answer came in a toneless monotone, like the dripping of water from stalactites in subterranean caverns. "I was Thothmekri; I am dead."

"Well, lead me out of this accursed temple, will you?" Conan requested, his flesh crawling.

With measured, mechanical steps the dead man moved toward a black arch. Conan followed him. A glance back showed him once again the vast, shadowy hall with its tiers of sarcophagi, the dead men sprawled about the altar; the head of the Khitan he had slain stared sightless up at the sweeping shadows.

The glow of the jewel illuminated the black tunnels like an ensorceled lamp, dripping golden fire. Once Conan caught a glimpse of ivory flesh in the shadows, believed he saw the vampire that was Akivasha shrinking back from the glow of the jewel; and with her, other less human shapes scuttled or shambled into the darkness.

The dead man strode straight on, looking neither to right nor left, his pace as changeless as the tramp of doom. Cold sweat gathered thick on Conan's flesh. Icy doubts assailed him. How could he know that this terrible figure out of the past was leading him to freedom? But he knew that, left to himself, he could never untangle this bewitched maze of corridors and tunnels. He followed his awful guide through blackness that loomed before and behind them and was filled with skulking shapes of horror and lunacy that cringed from the blinding glow of the Heart.

Then the bronze doorway was before him, and Conan felt the night wind blowing across the desert, and saw the stars, and the starlit desert across which streamed the great black shadow of the pyramid. Thothmekri pointed silently into the desert, and then turned and stalked soundlessly back in the darkness. Conan stared after that silent figure that receded into the blackness on soundless, inexorable feet as one that moves to a known and inevitable doom, or returns to everlasting sleep.

With a curse the Cimmerian leaped

from the doorway and fled into the desert as if pursued by demons. He did not look back toward the pyramid, or toward the black towers of Khemi looming dimly across the sands. He headed southward toward the coast, and he ran as a man runs in ungovernable panic. The violent exertion shook his brain free of black cobwebs; the clean desert wind blew the nightmares from his soul and his revulsion changed to a wild tide of exultation before the desert gave way to a tangle of swampy growth through which he saw the black water lying before him, and the *Venturer* at anchor.

He plunged through the undergrowth, hip-deep in the marshes; dived headlong into the deep water, heedless of sharks or crocodiles, and swam to the galley and was clambering up the chain on to the deck, dripping and exultant, before the watch saw him.

"Awake, you dogs!" roared Conan, knocking aside the spear the startled lookout thrust at his breast. "Heave up the anchor! Lay to the doors! Give that fisherman a helmet full of gold and put him ashore! Dawn will soon be breaking, and before sunrise we must be racing for the nearest port of Zingara!"

He whirled about his head the great jewel, which threw off splashes of light that spotted the deck with golden fire.

The amazing return of Conan and the terrific contest to regain his kingship will be told in the thrilling chapters that bring this story to a close in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

The Creaking House

By CLARENCE EDWIN FLYNN

Sometimes, most often late at night,
When there is not a hint of light,
I hear the boards creak here and there,
In hall or attic, wall or stair;
And even in my room I hear
These noises at my very ear.
They say it is the timbers old
Settling, or shrinking from the cold.

I don't agree. I think instead
It is the footsteps of the dead,
Coming to throng the stair and floor,
And re-enact old scenes once more.
I think they come when all is still
To roam the dear old place at will,
Then slip reluctantly away
As comes the breaking of the day.

"The brain of Galos Gann had triumphed over time and place."

In the World's Dusk

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A gripping tale of the last survivor of the human race and his attempts to repopulate the world

THE city Zor reared its somber towers and minarets of black marble into the ruddy sunset, a great mass of climbing spires circumvallated by a high black wall. Twelve gates of massive brass opened in that wall, and outside it there lay the white salt desert that now covered the whole of earth. A cruel, glaring plain that stretched eye-achingly to the horizons, its monotony was broken

by no hill or valley or sea. Long ago the last seas had dried up and disappeared, and long ago the ages of geological gradation had smoothed mountain and hill and valley into a featureless blank.

As the sun sank lower, it struck a shaft of red light across the city Zor into a great hall in the topmost spire. The crimson rays cut through the shadowy gloom of the dim, huge room and bathed the sitting figure of Galos Gann.

Brooding in the ruddy glow, Galos Gann looked out across the desert to the sinking sun, and said, "It is another day. The end comes soon."

Chin in hand he brooded, and the sun sank, and the shadows in the great hall deepened and darkened about him. Out in the dusking sky blossomed the stars, and they peered down through the portico like taunting white eyes at him. And it seemed to him that he heard their thin, silvery star-voices cry mockingly across the sky to each other, "The end comes soon to the race of Galos Gann."

For Galos Gann was the last man of all men. Sitting alone in his darksome hall high in somber Zor, he knew that nowhere around the desert globe did there move another human shape nor echo another human voice. He was that one about whom during anticipatory ages a fearful, foreboding fascination had clung—the final survivor. He tasted a loneliness no other man had ever known, for it was his to brood upon all the marching millions of men who had gone before him and who were now no more. He could look back across the millioned millions of years to the tumultuous youth of earth in whose warm seas had spawned the first protoplasmic life which, under the potent influences of cosmic radiation, had evolved through more and more complex animal forms into the culminating form of man. He could mark how man had risen through primeval savagery to world civilization that had finally given men mighty powers and had lengthened their life-span to centuries. And he could mark too how the grim, grinding mechanism of natural forces had in the end brought doom to the fair cities of that golden age.

Steadily, silently, inexorably, through the ages the hydrosphere or water envelope of earth had slowly dwindled, due to the loss of its particles into space from molecular dispersion. The seas had dried up as the millions of years had passed, and salt deserts had crept across the world. And men had seen the end close at hand for their race, and because they saw it they ceased to bring forth children.

They were weary of the endless, hopeless struggle, and they would not listen to the pleadings of Galos Gann, their greatest scientist, who alone among them yearned to keep the dying race alive. And so in their weariness the last generation of them had passed away, and in the world was left no living man but the unyielding Galos Gann.

In his dark hall high in Zor, Galos Gann sat huddled in his robes brooding upon these things, his withered face and black, living eyes unchanging. Then at last he stood erect. He strode with his robes swirling about him onto the balcony outside, and in the darkness he looked up at the mocking white eyes of the stars.

He said, "You think that you look down on the last of men, that all the glories of my race are a story that is told and ended, but you are wrong. I am Galos Gann, the greatest man of all the men that have lived on earth. And it is my unconquerable will that my race shall not die but shall live on to greater glories."

The white stars were silent, wheeling with cynical imperturbability over the deserts beyond night-shrouded Zor.

And Galos Gann raised his hand to-

ward Rigel and Canopus and Achernar in a gesture pregnant with defiance and menace.

"Somewhere and somehow I will find means to keep the race of man living on!" he cried to them. "Yes, and the day will come when our seed will yoke you and all your worlds in submissive harness to man!"

Then Galos Gann, filled with that determination, came to a great resolve and went to his laboratories and procured certain instruments and cryptic mechanisms. Holding them inside his robes, he went down from the tower and walked through the dark streets of the city Zor.

Very small and alone he seemed as he wended through the dim starlight and glooming shadows of the mighty city's ways, yet proudly he stalked; for unconquerable defiance to fate flamed in his heart and vitalized his brain with unshakable resolve.

He came to the low, squat structure that he sought, and its door opened with a sighing sound as he approached. He entered, and there in a small dark room was a stair down which he went. The coils of that spiral stair dropped into a great subterranean hall of black marble illuminated by a feeble blue light that had no visible source.

When Galos Gann stepped at last on its tessellated tile floor, he stood looking along the oblong hall. Upon its far-stretching walls were a hundred high square panels that bore in painted pictures the story of mankind. The first of those panels showed the primal protoplasmic life from which man had descended, and the last of the panels displayed this very subterranean chamber. For in crypts set into the floor of this hall there lay the dead people of the city Zor who had been the last generation of mankind. There was one last empty crypt that waited for Galos Gann when he should lie down in it to die, and since this was the last chapter of mankind's story, it had been pictured in the last panel.

But Galos Gann disregarded the painted walls and strode along the hall, opening the crypts in the floor one after another. He worked on until at last before him lay the scores of dead men and women, their bodies perfectly preserved so that they seemed sleeping.

Galos Gann said to them, "It is my thought that even you who are not now living can mayhap be used to keep mankind from perishing. It seems an ill thing to disturb you in the peace of death. But nowhere else save in death can I find those I must have to perpetuate mankind."

Then Galos Gann began to work upon the bodies of the dead, summoning up from his mighty resolution superhuman scientific powers which even he had hitherto never possessed.

By supreme chemical achievement he synthesized new blood with which he filled the wasted veins of the bodies. And by powerful electric stimulants and glandular injections he set their hearts to beating convulsively, and then regularly. And as their hearts pumped the new blood through their bodies to their perfectly preserved brains, the dead regained slow consciousness and staggered upright and looked dazedly at one another and at the watching Galos Gann.

Galos Gann felt a mighty pride and exultation as he looked at these strong men and fair women whom he had brought back from death. He said to them:

"I have recalled you to life because I have resolved that our race shall not come to an end and be forgotten of the universe. It is my determination that mankind shall continue, and through you I shall effect this."

The jaws of one of the staring men moved stiffly and from between them came the rusty accents of a voice long unused.

"What madness of yours is this, Galos Gann? You have given us the semblance of life but we are still dead, and how can we who are dead prolong the life of man?"

"You move and speak, therefore you are living," insisted Galos Gann. "You shall mate together and bring forth sons, and they shall be the progenitors of new peoples."

The dead man said hollowly, "You strive against the inevitable like a child breaking his hands against a door of marble. It is the law of the universe that everything which exists must come some day to an end. Planets wither and die and fall back into their parent suns, and suns strike one against the other and are transformed into nebulæ, and the nebulæ last not but in turn condense into other suns and worlds that in their own turn must die.

"How shall you hope amid this universal law of death to keep the race of man for ever living? We have lived a fair life for many million million years, we have struggled and won and lost, have laughed in the sunlight and dreamed under the stars, have played our part in the mighty drama of eternity. Now it is time we pass to our appointed end."

As the dead man finished speaking, a hollow, low whisper of assent went up from all the other staring dead.

"Aye," they said, "it is time the tired sons of men rested in the blessed sleep of death."

But the brow of Galos Gann was dark with resolve, and his eyes flashed and his form stiffened with unchangeable will.

"Your words avail you nothing," he told the dead. "Despite your icy counsels of surrender, I am determined that man shall live on to challenge the blind laws of the cosmos. Therefore you shall obey me, for well you know that with my powers and science I can force you to my will. You are not dead now but living, and you shall re-people the city Zor."

Galos Gann with these words walked to the spiral stair and started up its winding way. And helplessly, dully submissive, the dead men and women followed him up the stair, walking stiffly with a confused, heavy trampling up the steps.

A STRANGE spectacle it was when Galos Gann led his silent host out into the starlit streets of the city. And by day and by night thereafter was Zor a weird sight, peopled again by those who once had peopled it before they died. For Galos Gann decreed that they should live in the same buildings in which they had lived before. And those that had been husbands and wives before should be husbands and wives now, and in all things they should dwell as they had before their deaths.

So all day beneath the hot sun the dead went to and fro in Zor and pretended that they were truly living. They walked stiffly in the streets and gave one another greeting in their grating, rusty voices, and those that had had trades in old time followed those trades now, so that the cheery sounds of work and life rang in the city.

By night they thronged into the great theater of the city and sat in stiff immobility while those who had been dancers and singers performed with heavy clumsiness on the stage. And the dead audience applauded, and laughed, and their laughter was a strange sound.

And at night when the stars peered curiously down at Zor, those of them who had been young men and maidens walked apart and with stiff and uncouth gestures made pantomime of love, and spoke

words of love to one another. And they wedded one another, for that was the decree of Galos Gann.

In his high tower, Galos Gann watched as moon after moon was born and waxed and died. Great hope was his as the months passed one by one in the dead-tenanted city.

He said to himself, "These are not wholly living—something there was that my powers could not bring back from death. But even such as they are, they will serve to give mankind a new start in the universe."

The slow months passed and at last to one of the dead couples living in the city, a child was born. High flared the hopes of Galos Gann when he heard, and great was his excitement as he hastened through the city to see. But when he saw the child, he felt his heart grow cold. For this infant was like the parents of whom it was born, it was not wholly living. It moved and saw and uttered sounds, but its movements and cries were stiff and strange, and its eyes had death behind them.

Not wholly yet did Galos Gann give up hope in his great plan. He waited for another child to be born, but the next child too was the same.

Then indeed did his faith and hope perish. He called the dead citizens of Zor together and spoke to them. He said:

"Why do you not bring forth wholly living children, seeing that you yourselves are now living? Do you do this but to thwart me?"

Out of the gaunt-eyed throng a dead man answered him.

"Death cannot bring forth life any more than light can be born of darkness. Despite your words we know that we are dead, and we can give birth only to death. Now be convinced of the futility of your mad scheme and allow us to return to the peace of death, and let the race of man come peacefully to its destined end."

Galos Gann told them darkly, "Return then to the nothingness you crave, since you cannot serve my purpose. But know that not now and not ever shall I relinquish my purpose to perpetuate the race."

The dead answered him not, but turning their backs upon him moved in a silent, trampling throng through the streets of the city toward that low, squat building which they knew.

They passed without any word down the spiral stair to the blue-lit chamber of the crypts, and there each lay down once more in the crypt that was his. And the two women who had given birth lay down with their strange, dead little infants at their breasts. Then each drew over his crypt the stone lid that had covered it, until all were covered once more. And again there was solemn silence in the pictured burial-chamber of Zor.

UP IN his high tower Galos Gann had watched them go, and there for two days and nights he brooded over the again-silent city.

He said to himself, "It seems my hope was vain and that in truth humanity dies with me, since those who were dead cannot be the progenitors of future men. For where in all the world are there any living men and women such as alone will serve my ends?"

This he said, and then of a sudden a thought struck him that was like a dazzling and perilous lightning-flash across the brooding darkness of his mind. His brain well nigh reeled at the audacity of the thing it had suddenly conceived; yet such was the desperation of his purpose that he seized quakingly upon even this unearthly expedient.

He muttered to himself, "There are no living men and women in the world *today*. But what of the trillions of men and

women who have existed on earth in the past? Those trillions are separated from me by the abyss of time. Yet if I could somehow reach across that abyss, I could draw many living people out of the past into dead Zor."

The brain of Galos Gann fired to that staggering thought. And he, the greatest scientist earth had ever possessed, began that night the audacious attempt to draw across the gulf of ages living men and women who would father a new race.

Day after day, as the sun blazed on silent Zor, and night after night as the majestic stars wheeled above it, the withered scientist toiled in his laboratories. And gradually there grew up the great cylindrical mechanism of brass and quartz that was to pierce time.

At last the mighty mechanism was finished and Galos Gann prepared to begin his unthinkably daring attempt. Despite the inflexibility of his resolve, his soul quaked within him as he laid hand upon the switches that controlled the great machine. For well he knew that in attempting to thrust an arm across the awful gulf of time he was so outraging and rending the inmost frame of the cosmos that vast cataclysm might well result. Yet Galos Gann, driven by his unshaken determination, closed the switches with a trembling hand.

There came a crash of cosmic thunder and a hissing of blinding white force that filled the cylinder, and all the dead city Zor rocked strangely on its foundations as though shaken by a mighty wind.

Galos Gann was aware that the titanic forces he had loosed were tearing through space and time itself inside that cylinder, and riving the hitherto inviolate dimensions of the universe. The white force flamed and the thunder crashed and the city rocked until at last he convulsively opened the switches again. Then the glare and rumbling and rocking died, and as Galos Gann stared into the cylinder he cried in shrill triumph:

"I have succeeded! The brain of Galos Gann has triumphed over time and fate!"

For there in the cylinder stood a living man and woman who wore the grotesque cloth garments of ages before.

He opened the door of the cylinder and the man and woman came out with slow steps. Galos Gann told them exultantly:

"I have brought you across time to be the fountainhead of a new generation. Be not afraid! You are but the first of very many people I shall bring out of the past in the same way."

The man and woman looked at Galos Gann, and suddenly they laughed. Their laughter was not of mirth but was a maniac shrieking. Wildly, insanely, the man and woman laughed. And Galos Gann saw that they were both utterly mad.

Then he understood. By dint of superhuman science he had contrived to bring their living bodies across the gulf of ages unharmed, but in so doing he had destroyed their minds. Not any science beneath the sun could draw their minds over the abyss of time without wrecking them, for the mind is not of matter and does not obey the laws of matter. Yet Galos Gann was so possessed of his mighty plan that he refused to relinquish it.

"I will bring more across time," he told himself, "and surely some of them will come through with minds unharmed."

So again and again in the nights and days that followed, he operated the great mechanism and with its potent grasp snatched many scores of men and women out of their proper time and brought them across the millenniums to Zor. But always, though he brought their bodies through unharmed, he could not bring

their minds; so that it was only mad men and women who came from the cylinder, out of every age and land.

These mad people dwelt in Zor in a most frightful fashion, roaming its streets so that no corner of the city was beyond the sound of their insane shrieking. They ascended the somber towers and raved and gibbered from them at the dead city and at the barren desert beyond it. It seemed that even the insensate city grew fearful of the crazed horde whom it housed, for the city of the mad was more awful than had been the city of the dead.

Finally Galos Gann ceased to draw men and women out of the past, for he saw that never could he hope to bring them through sane. For a time he strove to replace the minds of these crazed people which had been destroyed. But he saw that that too was beyond the power of any material science.

Then in that shrieking city of madness which was the last city on earth, Galos Gann grew afraid that he too was going mad. He felt a desire to scream with the others through the dark streets.

So in sick disgust and fear he went forth and destroyed those mad people down to the last one, giving them the release of death. And Zor again knew silence as the last man solitary walked its ways.

FINALLY there came a day when Galos Gann walked onto his balcony and looked fixedly out over the white and barren desert.

He said, "I sought to bring new men out of death, and then out of time, but neither from death nor time it seems can come those to prolong the race. How can I hope to produce men in a little moment of time when it required millioned millions of years for the forces of nature to produce them? So I shall produce the new race in the way that the old was produced. I shall change the face of earth so that new life may spring from it as it did long ago, and in time that life will evolve once more into men."

Animated by that colossal resolve, Galos Gann, the last and mightiest scientist of earth, began an awesome task that would hitherto have never even been dreamed of by any man.

He first assembled all the forces of which his race had had knowledge, and many of which he himself had discovered. And he devised even mightier forces such as even a god might fear to unchain too lightly.

Then Galos Gann loosed his powers and began to bore a shaft down into the solid lithosphere of the earth. Down through sandstone and granite and gneiss he bored until he had passed down through the rock crust and was deep in the mighty core of nickel-iron which is the heart of the planet.

In that iron core he constructed a great chamber which he fitted with the equipment and the mechanisms that he would require for the task ahead of him. And when everything he needed was in that deep chamber, he retired down to it and then collapsed and closed the shaft that led up to the surface.

Then Galos Gann began to shake the earth. From his deep chamber in the iron core he loosed small impulses of force at exact intervals. And the period of rhythm of these impulses was timed with perfect accuracy to the period of rhythm of the earth.

At first the little impulses had no effect upon the vast globe of the planet. But little by little their effect accumulated and grew stronger, until finally the whole rocky crust of the lithosphere was shaking violently. These stresses and strains produced immense pressures and heats within the rocks, melting much of them into lava. And this molten lava burst

upward in fiery masses all around the globe, as it had done when the earth was in its first youth.

Galos Gann in his deep-buried chamber watched through his instruments and saw the changes taking place upon the surface of the earth. He saw the upthrust masses of molten magma give off their imprisoned gases, and observed those gases combining to form a new hydrosphere of water-vapor clouds around the planet.

The earth was passing through the same changes it had passed through long ago. As its molten surface began to cool, rain began to fall from the clouds and gathered upon the torn surface of the world in new seas.

Galos Gann watched tensely with his far-seeing, marvelous instruments, and saw complex compounds being built up along the shores of the warm seas, from carbon and hydrogen and oxygen and other elements. And beneath the photosynthetic action of the sunlight these organic compounds combined into the first beginnings of primal protoplasmic life.

Galos Gann said then to himself, "The new cycle of earth's life is started. The sun's radiation calls forth life from the inorganic elements as it did ages ago in the past. That life must evolve upward under the same conditions in the same way, and in time men will evolve from it and will again people the earth."

He calculated the ages that it would take for a new human race to evolve upon the face of earth. Then he took a carefully measured quantity of a subtle drug which he had prepared, one which suspended indefinitely every vital function of the human body and yet permitted it to remain living in a deathless sleep. He lay down upon his couch in the buried chamber inside the earth.

"I will sleep now in suspended animation until the new race of man has evolved," said Galos Gann. "When I awake, earth will again be crowded with the victorious and undying race of men, and I can go forth and look upon them and then die in peace, knowing that man lives."

So saying, he folded his arms upon his breast, and the drug took its effect upon him, and he slept.

And it seemed to him that no sooner had his eyes closed and his consciousness darkened, than he was awaking again, for in sleep an eternity and a moment are the same.

For a little, Galos Gann could not indeed believe that he had slept through the ages for which his drug had been calculated. But his chronometers that measured time by the transmutation of uranium showed him that indeed he had lain sleeping for many million millions of years.

Then he knew that he had come to the moment of his triumph. For in those slow millenniums must have evolved the new race of men that must now people the surface of the earth above him.

His hands shook as he prepared to blast a new shaft up to the surface from his chamber.

"Death is not far from me," said Galos Gann, "but first these eyes shall look on the new race which I have created to perpetuate the old."

His forces pierced a shaft up through the rocky crust of the lithosphere to the surface, and borne by his powers Galos Gann rose up that shaft and emerged onto the face of earth into the sunlight.

He stood and looked about him. He was in the midst of a white salt desert that stretched monotonously to the horizons in all directions, and that had nowhere any hill or valley to break its blank expanse.

A queer chill came upon the heart of

Galos Gann as he stood in the glaring sunlight of the lonely desert.

"Can it be," he asked himself, "that the forces of nature have dried and worn the earth just as they did long ago? Even so, somewhere on earth must be the new races of men that time has evolved."

He looked in one direction after another and finally he saw on one horizon the distant spires of a city. His heart gladdened at that sight and he moved toward that city with quick and eager expectation. But when he came close to the city, he was troubled anew. For it was a city of black marble towers and minarets belted by a high black wall, and in many ways it was very like the city Zor that long ago had perished.

He came to one of its open gates and passed into the city. And like a man in a dream he walked through the streets, turning his head this way and that. For this city was as empty of life as ancient Zor had been. Not in any of its courts or ways did there move one human shape, nor echo one human voice. And now a fatal foreboding and knowledge came upon Galos Gann, and led him into the highest tower and up to a dim and dusky hall at the tower's top.

There at the end of the hall sat huddled in his robes a withered, shrunken man who seemed very near to death.

Galos Gann spoke to him in a strange voice and said, "Who are you, and where are the others of the races of men?"

The other raised his swaying head, and peering blindly at Galos Gann he answered, "There are no others, for I am the last survivor of all the race of man.

"Millioned millions of years ago our life began in the protoplasm of the world's warm seas, and developed through many forms into man, and the civilization and power of man grew great.

"But the seas dried up, and as earth withered, our race withered and died also, until I alone am left in this dead city. And my own death is upon me."

With these words, the shrunken, swaying man fell forward, and sighed once, and lay dead upon the floor.

And Galos Gann, the last man, looked across his body at the sinking sun.

The Ship That Committed Suicide

By A. J. MORDTMANN

A tender and pathetic story about a weird experience in the Antarctic

IT WAS back in the days of sailing-vessels. I was second mate on the British freighter *Carnatic*. On a trip from Rio de Janeiro to Batavia, heavy storms drove us far to the south and into the Antarctic ice-belt.

Bart Clifford, our captain, had brought his young wife along. Her name was Fanny, and she was a charmer. She was the commander of that boat, you may be sure of that. You never saw a crew on their good behavior the way ours was. Mrs. Clifford was a great lover of plants and flowers, and she had big boxes of them growing and blooming all the time. We moved them back and forth for her, out into the sun and rain, and—when we got down into the cold latitudes—away from the sleet and the frost. We watered them for her, budded and trimmed and all the rest of it, and when one of us got a nosegay for his labor, pinned on by her own white hands, he was as proud as a peacock. It goes without saying that the captain had his buttonhole posy every day. He couldn't have given his orders without it.

The north winds drove the *Carnatic* farther and farther down into the drift-ice, and for a long time we hadn't had much doubt that we were done for. One night, when it was black as pitch and blowing a hurricane, the ship drove in among the blocks of ice and stuck fast. She didn't seem to have been hurt particularly, but there she was; and all of a sudden the thermometer dropped and she froze into a solid mass with the cakes of ice.

There was nothing to do but get away from her as fast as possible. The captain called a council of war, and everybody agreed to that.

The two boats were got free of the ship and equipped with compass, water and supplies. The big boat was put under the command of the first mate, and the captain ordered his wife to go in that one, since it was more comfortable and much safer. But as all ship-captains worthy of the name have done since there have been ships and captains, he kept the harder and more dangerous job for himself and took command of the little boat.

When the first boat was out of the way, Captain Clifford ordered his crew into his little egg-shell, went back for his log-book, and took a last look about his cabin to see if there was anything else important which he could carry easily. There was no time to waste. An ugly white mist was settling down, one of those solid polar fogs that you can cut with a jack-knife. When you are in one of them, you can't see three steps away. When the captain climbed over the railing, the fog was closing down on the ship, and he and the five men that made up his crew pushed off in a hurry. The other boat was nowhere to be seen, but they knew in a general way where they

were going. Fortunately, the storm had died down.

They crawled toward the north in the thick fog, keeping a sharp eye out for the big boat, but a day and a night passed without their finding it. Just as day was dawning, a strong southeast wind came up and drove the fog away. Toward noon, the air was quieter and the gray curtain over the sky began to break up and show the first scraps of blue. In half an hour the sun was shining brightly on the restless, white-capped waves.

The boat had long since come clear of the ice-field. And in the course of the afternoon, a heartening sight greeted the sailors. Off on the horizon, with her sails reefed, lay a handsome brig. She was evidently scanning the sea, no doubt for them. Only a few minutes after they sighted her, it was clear that she was maneuvering to come in their direction. Captain Clifford declared that the brig had already picked up the big boat, and learning the situation from its crew, had been searching for the small one. The event proved that he was right. When Clifford climbed on the deck of the brig, the first person he set eyes on was his mate, who had been in command of the big boat.

But the captain's blood froze in his veins, and the mate's face was as pale as death.

"Captain," the mate stammered, "where is your wife? Didn't she come in your boat?"

"*My* boat? My wife? I told her to go with you! Didn't she do it?"

"Good God, no!" The crew gathered about the two officers, puzzled and aghast. If Mrs. Fanny Clifford had not been saved, nothing else seemed of much importance. We had called her the *Carnatic's* mascot, and we knew that she brought us good luck.

From the frightened report of the first mate, it gradually became clear that Mrs. Clifford had been the victim of a terrible misunderstanding, and that the captain's wife, whom every man on board had been secretly in love with, the beautiful guiding star of two dozen rough sailors, had been left behind on the deserted ship in the ice-jam, lonely, helpless, doomed to death.

In the course of time it became clear to all of us exactly how it had all happened.

Mrs. Clifford had been in the act of climbing down into the larger boat, when she had caught sight of the approaching fog, and her seaman's experience had told her instantly that it would be impossible for the two boats to stay together in that fog. The prospect of a separation from her husband was more than she could endure. "I must stay with Bart!" she cried excitedly, and drew away from the group. The first mate and all others understood her feeling perfectly, and no one made any attempt to change her decision.

The big boat pushed off, made its way through the ice, and was out of sight of the ship almost instantly.

That was the last any of us had seen of the unfortunate woman. The second boat had taken off a few minutes later in frantic haste. Mrs. Clifford had no doubt gone back, as the captain had done, to make some last arrangements. Perhaps an accident had happened to her, she had sprained an ankle, had fainted. . . . There was no profit in speculating, although none of us could help doing it. The cruel fact was, the captain had come away from his ship and left on it the one object that made life worth living for him.

The poor fellow was half crazy, or worse than that. He tried to jump overboard, with some mad idea of swimming

back to the ice-field. We had difficulty in holding him, and he was deaf to our reasoning and our sympathy. The captain of the brig was so affected that he did a great deal more than he would have been able to justify to his owners. He left his course and steered south, clear into the drift-ice. He cruised about in that dangerous territory for two days, but all to no avail. The *Carnatic* was never sighted, and the brig came back at last to her course and sailed on, with nothing to show for her kindly efforts but a three or four days' delay.

Clifford's desperation had given way to a condition of dull indifference. He seemed like a man who lives only because he lacks the energy to end his life. But as the days wore on, we began to notice an improvement in him. As we approached Cape Town, he became calm and almost cheerful. It was clear that his hope was returning.

In Cape Town, Clifford fitted out a tight little schooner and undertook, at his own expense, a trip to the Antarctic country. He was convinced that his wife was still alive and could be found. A number of us shipped with him. But although we risked our lives a hundred times, and although we stuck to the mad enterprise till our provisions gave out, we limped back into a friendly port at last, with our wreck of a little vessel, exactly as wise as we had set out.

We tried it once more, with a larger boat, but with the same result. Clifford had beggared himself by this time, and there seemed nothing more to do. Several of us had spent months at the forlorn hope, and had accomplished nothing. But the captain was as sure as ever that if we could keep at it a little longer he would find his wife alive and save her. "The third time," he kept repeating, "the third time—I could find her the third time. . . ."

When we had left the *Carnatic*, the ship had been, as far as we had been able to tell, entirely seaworthy and uninjured. It might easily turn out that she would hold together for months and even years. It was true that she had the ice to contend with, but the ice might prove rather a protection than otherwise. Since neither of the expeditions had sighted her, it was likely that she had been drawn into the drifting ice-field still farther south, into the girdle of solid ice, and had been completely frozen in. There were a year's supplies for twenty-seven men aboard her, and there was no reason why Mrs. Clifford should starve in a long, long time. And anyway, it seemed like sheer murder to desert the captain yet. . . .

To make a long story short, a number of us clubbed together and put in what savings we had. That didn't make very much, but Clifford had wealthy friends in Great Britain, South Africa, the United States, Brazil, everywhere. We got his case before a lot of them. We had pretty much the whole world stirred up about the painful business, and we fitted out the handsome *Lady Godiva*, specially equipped—wonderfully so for those days—to stand an icy reception. We had a tough time of it.

But we found the *Carnatic*.

It may seem that what we found didn't help anybody much. But I have always been glad we stuck to it.

We made straight for the spot where the log showed that the *Carnatic* had been frozen in and deserted. There was nothing to be found, either above or below the surface. There was a little drift-ice in the neighborhood, but only a very little.

We kept on toward the south for several hours. By that time the ice was packed so close that we could go no farther. We turned east and skirted as near the ice-pack as we dared come. At night we furled sail and brought the ship to,

so as not to run any risk of missing the derelict in the darkness.

We sailed east for another day. We were following the direction in which, in view of the prevailing winds, the *Carnatic* was most likely to have drifted. We were hunting for a needle in a haystack. Yet every one of us, and not merely poor Captain Clifford—he was forty-three years old, but his hair had turned white in a few months, and he walked like a man of sixty-five—had a feeling that something was due to happen.

We heard the bell strike twice. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. The weather was beautiful. Suddenly the call came down from the crow's nest:

"Ship ahoy!"

A ship, in this Sahara of the South Seas? It could be no ship but one!

"Where away?" Captain Clifford called up, in a shaking voice.

The man called the direction, and pointed with his hand. Clifford sprang to the helm and set the ship's course in accordance with the lookout's instructions.

"There—steady!" Clifford's instructions to the helmsman had grown sharp and determined. "North-northwest—2 west——"

"Ay, ay," said the sailor.

The captain took his telescope and climbed the mast himself.

For five minutes he studied the horizon without a word. Then he pushed his glass together and came slowly down.

"It's a three-master," he said. "It's—it's the *Carnatic!*"

Then his worn face began to quiver, and the tears gushed out of his eyes. He took off his cap and held it in his folded hands in front of his face, as if he were praying. A sailor pulled his sleeve across his eyes. Everybody stared at the horizon, although nobody could see even a spot on it. The masts creaked, the wind whistled in the rigging. Otherwise, it was as still on the *Lady Godiva* as if we had been in church.

The keel-water foamed and gurgled behind us. In a quarter of an hour, most of us could see the ship with the naked eye. A quarter of an hour more, and we could tell distinctly that she was drifting helplessly without sail or rudder.

We got a boat ready. Everybody was nervous and unsteady.

We could see now that the vessel was a neglected, floating ruin. She rose and fell on the troubled water, as soulless and purposeless as so much driftwood.

Then all at once she swung slowly around, and we could read the name, in faded gilt letters: CARNATIC.

The hull was paintless and weather-beaten. A few scraps of sail-cloth clung to the yards. The ropes and shrouds hung loose and neglected. We were so near that we could hear the masts groaning and the rusty rudder-chains grinding.

We manned the boat. Captain Clifford, the faithful Norwegian mate Ole Johanneson, who had been with him from the beginning, six sailors, and I, made up its crew, and we rowed to the uncanny ship. As we rowed over, nobody spoke a word.

It would have been quite a proposition for a landsman to reach the high deck of the tricky bobbing vessel. We skirted around her a little, till we spied a scrap of rope hanging down from the stern. Johanneson was on board in a jiffy, and the rest of us were not long in following him. The captain made for his cabin at once. The others of us scattered over the ship and began a careful search of every nook and corner.

WE HUNTED for two hours and found nothing. The ship was deserted. There was nothing for it but to go back. Our months of anxious, danger-

ous and tedious searching had come to an end. Fruitless—useless. . . .

I met Johanneson on the upper deck.

"Must we give it up?" I asked.

"I suppose so," he assented, sadly. "But, do you know—I can't find anything—but I have a feeling all the time that—that *she* isn't gone—that she's here somewhere—and not just her dead body—but——"

I stared at him. "Ole," I said, "I have the same feeling, exactly—especially down in the captain's cabin. I wonder——"

The captain's head and shoulders came in sight above the hatchway. An old man, weary and discouraged. Yet there was a light in his eyes that I had never seen in them before. I have often wondered what he had seen or heard, even by that time. But that is something I shall never know.

"Men," he said, "I guess we might as well go, now. We've looked everywhere, and there isn't—*anyone* here. Let me take just one last look about the cabin. Then we'll put off——"

And he was gone again. We waited, five minutes, ten minutes. . . .

All at once we heard a shrill cry. I don't think any of us was able to tell whether it was a cry of alarm, of agony, of surprize, or even of joy. But we all rushed down in the direction it seemed to come from. . . .

We ran into the cabin. The captain sat bolt upright on his sofa. He was stone-dead. His heart had stopped beating. On his thin face there was an expression of rapturous happiness, which settled slowly into one of peaceful calm.

And in his hand he held a pink geranium blossom.

Puzzled, dazed, unable to believe the evidence of our own senses, we nevertheless busied ourselves with the dead man—we had even begun to make plans for the disposition of the body.

"We must get him back some way to the *Lady Godiva* and have Hubbell examine him," Johanneson was saying. "It might be that he isn't——"

Just then one of the sailors glanced at the port-hole and rushed toward the door with a wild yell of terror.

"Get overboard, all of you, as fast as you can," he screamed. *"She's turning over!"*

He was right. The ship was capsizing.

Leaving the dead man where he was, we stumbled blindly up the steps and rushed to the side of the vessel. The tilt was so steep that some of us made the last few feet on our hands and knees. We paid no attention to the boat we had come in. There was no time to fool with boats. We dropped into the water and swam desperately to get as far away as possible from the rolling monster. They had been watching us from the *Lady Godiva*, and another boat picked us up and carried us to safety.

The *Carnatic* heeled over, slowly, slowly, then more and more rapidly; first to starboard, then her bow began to sink. All at once, so suddenly that it left us gasping as we gazed at it from the deck of the *Lady Godiva*, that sound, watertight vessel plunged her nose down into the ocean—how it could have happened I have no idea—and was gone. She left so big a hole in the water that the waves ran into the pool in a maelstrom. For a few seconds it sucked strongly at the *Lady Godiva*. The foam spurted high in the air. Then the ocean was as empty and silent again as if the *Carnatic* had been only a phantom ship, after all.

We talked it over, standing on the deck and trying to get our wits about us,

And we all agreed that we had done the right thing, even though we couldn't understand what had happened.

"He found her, after all," said Ole. "Where did the flower come from, unless——"

"And that cry," said one of the men. "That wasn't the captain. *That was a woman's voice!*"

Then we all remembered. It *had* been a woman's voice, we were sure.

"She was there," said Ole. "And they had their burial at sea—the two of them—and their ship——"

The Graveyard Rats

By HENRY KUTTNER

A gruesome fate befell the old caretaker of the cemetery in the horrible burrows beneath the graves

OLD Masson, the caretaker of one of Salem's oldest and most neglected cemeteries, had a feud with the rats. Generations ago they had come up from the wharves and settled in the graveyard, a colony of abnormally large rats, and when Masson had taken charge after the inexplicable disappearance of the former caretaker, he decided that they must go. At first he set traps for them and put poisoned food by their burrows, and later he tried to shoot them, but it did no good. The rats stayed, multiplying and overrunning the graveyard with their ravenous hordes.

They were large, even for the *mus decumanus,* which sometimes measures fifteen inches in length, exclusive of the naked pink and gray tail. Masson had caught glimpses of some as large as good-sized cats, and when, once or twice, the grave-diggers had uncovered their burrows, the malodorous tunnels were large enough to enable a man to crawl into them on his hands and knees. The ships that had come generations ago from distant ports to the rotting Salem wharves had brought strange cargoes.

Masson wondered sometimes at the extraordinary size of these burrows. He recalled certain vaguely disturbing legends he had heard since coming to ancient, witch-haunted Salem—tales of a moribund, inhuman life that was said to exist in forgotten burrows in the earth. The old days, when Cotton Mather had hunted down the evil cults that worshipped Hecate and the dark Magna Mater in frightful orgies, had passed; but dark gabled houses still leaned perilously toward each other over narrow cobbled streets, and blasphemous secrets and mysteries were said to be hidden in subterranean cellars and caverns, where forgotten pagan rites were still celebrated in defiance of law and sanity. Wagging their gray heads wisely, the elders declared that there were worse things than rats and maggots crawling in the unhallowed earth of the ancient Salem cemeteries.

And then, too, there was this curious dread of the rats. Masson disliked and respected the ferocious little rodents, for he knew the danger that lurked in their flashing, needle-sharp fangs; but he could not understand the inexplicable horror which the oldsters held for deserted, rat-infested houses. He had heard vague rumors of ghoulish beings that dwelt far underground, and that had the power of commanding the rats, marshaling them like horrible armies. The rats, the old men whispered, were messengers between this world and the grim and ancient caverns far below Salem. Bodies had been stolen from graves for nocturnal subterranean feasts, they said. The myth of the Pied Piper is a fable that hides a blasphemous horror, and the black pits of Avernus have brought forth hell-spawned monstrosities that never venture into the light of day.

Masson paid little attention to these tales. He did not fraternize with his neighbors, and, in fact, did all he could to hide the existence of the rats from intruders. Investigation, he realized, would undoubtedly mean the opening of many graves. And while some of the gnawed, empty coffins could be attributed to the activities of the rats, Masson might find it difficult to explain the mutilated bodies that lay in some of the coffins.

The purest gold is used in filling teeth, and this gold is not removed when a man is buried. Clothing, of course, is another matter; for usually the undertaker provides a plain broadcloth suit that is cheap and easily recognizable. But gold is another matter; and sometimes, too, there were medical students and less reputable doctors who were in need of cadavers, and not over-scrupulous as to where these were obtained.

So far Masson had successfully managed to discourage investigation. He had fiercely denied the existence of the rats, even though they sometimes robbed him of his prey. Masson did not care what happened to the bodies after he had performed his gruesome thefts, but the rats inevitably dragged away the whole cadaver through the hole they gnawed in the coffin.

The size of these burrows occasionally worried Masson. Then, too, there was the curious circumstance of the coffins always being gnawed open at the end, never at the side or top. It was almost as though the rats were working under the direction of some impossibly intelligent leader.

Now he stood in an open grave and threw a last sprinkling of wet earth on the heap beside the pit. It was raining, a slow, cold drizzle that for weeks had been descending from soggy black clouds. The graveyard was a slough of yellow, sucking mud, from which the rain-washed tombstones stood up in irregular battalions. The rats had retreated to their burrows, and Masson had not seen one for days. But his gaunt, unshaved face was set in frowning lines; the coffin on which he was standing was a wooden one.

The body had been buried several days earlier, but Masson had not dared to disinter it before. A relative of the dead man had been coming to the grave at intervals, even in the drenching rain. But he would hardly come at this late hour, no matter how much grief he might be suffering, Masson thought, grinning wryly. He straightened and laid the shovel aside.

From the hill on which the ancient graveyard lay he could see the lights of Salem flickering dimly through the downpour. He drew a flashlight from his pocket. He would need light now. Taking up the spade, he bent and examined the fastenings of the coffin.

Abruptly he stiffened. Beneath his feet

he sensed an unquiet stirring and scratching, as though something were moving within the coffin. For a moment a pang of superstitious fear shot through Masson, and then rage replaced it as he realized the significance of the sound. The rats had forestalled him again!

In a paroxysm of anger Masson wrenched at the fastenings of the coffin. He got the sharp edge of the shovel under the lid and pried it up until he could finish the job with his hands. Then he sent the flashlight's cold beam darting down into the coffin.

Rain spattered against the white satin lining; the coffin was empty. Masson saw a flicker of movement at the head of the case, and darted the light in that direction.

The end of the sarcophagus had been gnawed through, and a gaping hole led into darkness. A black shoe, limp and dragging, was disappearing as Masson watched, and abruptly he realized that the rats had forestalled him by only a few minutes. He fell on his hands and knees and made a hasty clutch at the shoe, and the flashlight incontinently fell into the coffin and went out. The shoe was tugged from his grasp; he heard a sharp, excited squealing, and then he had the flashlight again and was darting its light into the burrow.

It was a large one. It had to be, or the corpse could not have been dragged along it. Masson wondered at the size of the rats that could carry away a man's body, but the thought of the loaded revolver in his pocket fortified him. Probably if the corpse had been an ordinary one Masson would have left the rats with their spoils rather than venture into the narrow burrow, but he remembered an especially fine set of cuff-links he had observed, as well as a stickpin that was undoubtedly a genuine pearl. With scarcely a pause he clipped the flashlight to his belt and crept into the burrow.

It was a tight fit, but he managed to squeeze himself along. Ahead of him in the flashlight's glow he could see the shoes dragging along the wet earth of the bottom of the tunnel. He crept along the burrow as rapidly as he could, occasionally barely able to squeeze his lean body through the narrow walls.

The air was overpowering with its musty stench of carrion. If he could not reach the corpse in a minute, Masson decided, he would turn back. Belated fears were beginning to crawl, maggot-like, within his mind, but greed urged him on. He crawled forward, several times passing the mouths of adjoining tunnels. The walls of the burrow were damp and slimy, and twice lumps of dirt dropped behind him. The second time he paused and screwed his head around to look back. He could see nothing, of course, until he had unhooked the flashlight from his belt and reversed it.

Several clods lay on the ground behind him, and the danger of his position suddenly became real and terrifying. With thoughts of a cave-in making his pulse race, he decided to abandon the pursuit, even though he had now almost overtaken the corpse and the invisible things that pulled it. But he had overlooked one thing: the burrow was too narrow to allow him to turn.

Panic touched him briefly, but he remembered a side tunnel he had just passed, and backed awkwardly along the tunnel until he came to it. He thrust his legs into it, backing until he found himself able to turn. Then he hurriedly began to retrace his way, although his knees were bruised and painful.

Agonizing pain shot through his leg. He felt sharp teeth sink into his flesh, and kicked out frantically. There was a shrill squealing and the scurry of many

feet. Flashing the light behind him, Masson caught his breath in a sob of fear as he saw a dozen great rats watching him intently, their slitted eyes glittering in the light. They were great misshapen things, as large as cats, and behind them he caught a glimpse of a dark shape that stirred and moved swiftly aside into the shadow; and he shuddered at the unbelievable size of the thing.

The light had held them for a moment, but they were edging closer, their teeth dull orange in the pale light. Masson tugged at his pistol, managed to extricate it from his pocket, and aimed carefully. It was an awkward position, and he tried to press his feet into the soggy sides of the burrow so that he should not inadvertently send a bullet into one of them.

The rolling thunder of the shot deafened him, for a time, and the clouds of smoke set him coughing. When he could hear again and the smoke had cleared, he saw that the rats were gone. He put the pistol back and began to creep swiftly along the tunnel, and then with a scurry and a rush they were upon him again.

They swarmed over his legs, biting and squealing insanely, and Masson shrieked horribly as he snatched for his gun. He fired without aiming, and only luck saved him from blowing a foot off. This time the rats did not retreat so far, but Masson was crawling as swiftly as he could along the burrow, ready to fire again at the first sound of another attack.

There was a patter of feet and he sent the light stabbing back of him. A great gray rat paused and watched him. Its long ragged whiskers twitched, and its scabrous, naked tail was moving slowly from side to side. Masson shouted and the rat retreated.

He crawled on, pausing briefly, the black gap of a side tunnel at his elbow, as he made out a shapeless huddle on the damp clay a few yards ahead. For a second he thought it was a mass of earth that had been dislodged from the roof, and then he recognized it as a human body.

It was a brown and shriveled mummy, and with a dreadful unbelieving shock Masson realized that it was moving.

It was crawling toward him, and in the pale glow of the flashlight the man saw a frightful gargoyle face thrust into his own. It was the passionless, death's-head skull of a long-dead corpse, instinct with hellish life; and the glazed eyes swollen and bulbous betrayed the thing's blindness. It made a faint groaning sound at it crawled toward Masson, stretching its ragged and granulated lips in a grin of dreadful hunger. And Masson was frozen with abysmal fear and loathing.

Just before the Horror touched him, Masson flung himself frantically into the burrow at his side. He heard a scrambling noise at his heels, and the thing groaned dully as it came after him. Masson, glancing over his shoulder, screamed and propelled himself desperately through the narrow burrow. He crawled along awkwardly, sharp stones cutting his hands and knees. Dirt showered into his eyes, but he dared not pause even for a moment. He scrambled on, gasping, cursing, and praying hysterically.

Squealing triumphantly, the rats came at him, horrible hunger in their eyes. Masson almost succumbed to their vicious teeth before he succeeded in beating them off. The passage was narrowing, and in a frenzy of terror he kicked and screamed and fired until the hammer clicked on an empty shell. But he had driven them off.

He found himself crawling under a great stone, embedded in the roof, that dug cruelly into his back. It moved a little as his weight struck it, and an idea

flashed into Masson's fright-crazed mind. If he could bring down the stone so that it blocked the tunnel!

The earth was wet and soggy from the rains, and he hunched himself half upright and dug away at the dirt around the stone. The rats were coming closer. He saw their eyes glowing in the reflection of the flashlight's beam. Still he clawed frantically at the earth. The stone was giving. He tugged at it and it rocked in its foundation.

A RAT was approaching—the monster he had already glimpsed. Gray and leprous and hideous it crept forward with its orange teeth bared, and in its wake came the blind dead thing, groaning as it crawled. Masson gave a last frantic tug at the stone. He felt it slide downward, and then he went scrambling along the tunnel.

Behind him the stone crashed down, and he heard a sudden frightful shriek of agony. Clods showered upon his legs. A heavy weight fell on his feet and he dragged them free with difficulty. The entire tunnel was collapsing!

Gasping with fear, Masson threw himself forward as the soggy earth collapsed at his heels. The tunnel narrowed until he could barely use his hands and legs to propel himself; he wriggled forward like an eel and suddenly felt satin tearing beneath his clawing fingers, and then his head crashed against something that barred his path. He moved his legs, discovering that they were not pinned under the collapsed earth. He was lying flat on his stomach, and when he tried to raise himself he found that the roof was only a few inches from his back. Panic shot through him.

When the blind horror had blocked his path, he had flung himself desperately into a side tunnel, a tunnel that had no outlet. He was *in a coffin*, an empty coffin into which he had crept through the hole the rats had gnawed in its end!

He tried to turn on his back and found that he could not. The lid of the coffin pinned him down inexorably. Then he braced himself and strained at the coffin lid. It was immovable, and even if he could escape from the sarcophagus, how could he claw his way up through five feet of hard-packed earth?

He found himself gasping. It was dreadfully fetid, unbearably hot. In a paroxysm of terror he ripped and clawed at the satin until it was shredded. He made a futile attempt to dig with his feet at the earth from the collapsed burrow that blocked his retreat. If he were only able to reverse his position he might be able to claw his way through to air . . . air. . . .

White-hot agony lanced through his breast, throbbed in his eyeballs. His head seemed to be swelling, growing larger and larger; and suddenly he heard the exultant squealing of the rats. He began to scream insanely but could not drown them out. For a moment he thrashed about hysterically within his narrow prison, and then he was quiet, gasping for air. His eyelids closed, his blackened tongue protruded, and he sank down into the blackness of death with the mad squealing of the rats dinning in his ears.

Homecoming Day

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

The old colonel and his chum of former days were united at last—a brief weird story

HOMECOMING DAY was over. The team had won, Dress Parade had clicked smoothly, and the old grads, who had been well fed and cheered to the echo at evening mess, were now in the big gymnasium across the parade ground, where a colorful military ball was writing finis to the celebration. And Colonel Roger Samson, Thornleigh's president, was very tired.

Somehow, Homecoming Day always made him feel old. It took him back to the time when he was a young cadet at Thornleigh, strutting and proud in his gray uniform with the shiny shoulder pips and the new boots and Sam Black as he commanded the crack company of the battalion. So he sat in his study, a worn briar in his hands, and smiled a little wearily and a little sadly.

It was intermission. Outside his window, the boys were passing to and fro. Snatches of conversation came to him, talk of dates, and the hot music at the gym, and the chances of riding Reveillé and skipping the penalty sheet. Their cheerful chatter blended into Roger Samson's day dream. They were no longer 1935 cadets. They were "War" Richards, really named Walter Arthur, and "Brad" Sanders from Kentucky, who received his nickname the first evening at mess when he drawled, "Please pass the brad." They were "Red" Nuckols and Bill Hancock, the inseparable corporals of his own Company B, and that fresh rat, Billy Ludlow. . . .

The colonel reflected, somewhat bitterly, that none of his own class had returned for this Homecoming Day. It had been a good class. They had sworn eternal fealty to Thornleigh. And they had come back, too—something about the school, with its ivy-covered towers and the campus statue of old Marcus Thornleigh, commander in the army of Washington, made for a tradition deeper than mere spouting of flowery phrases at Finals. They had come back in a body to do him honor at the first Homecoming Day, just after he had been made president of the old academy. The old crowd, his crowd, had kept on. And then, year by year, they had fallen out. "Absent from formation here, gone to answer a Golden Reveillé," as one *In Memoriam* page in the academy annual had expressed it.

So Roger Samson dreamed and smiled, until the cadets and their girls went back to the gym and the music of the orchestra once more stole softly across the parade ground to his open window.

From closer by, for those not at the hop, the sweet notes of Taps, sounded by the band's best bugler, floated into his study. Officially, the corps was being put to bed. The colonel snapped off the light and went to the window. Brad Sanders had been a bugler too. An unconscious sigh escaped him. Brad Sanders, and Red Nuckols, and that grand crowd of boys. Adventurous "Little Billy" Ludlow, his room-mate, six feet one in his stocking feet. What ever had happened to the fellow? Dropped out of sight in one of his

interminable jungles in India or some place. The colonel reflected that he hadn't heard of Ludlow in a half-dozen years, but he never failed to think of him on Homecoming Day.

He watched as the yellow triangles marking commissioned officers' quarters, where lights were allowed after C. Q., dissolved into surrounding blackness. The suddenly mournful notes of the bugle were long drawn out. It was almost as if the world were ending, he reflected. Everything was dark now. Nothing was left but youth—happy, unthinking, unknowing youth, dancing madly to the rhythm of the throbbing drums. Suddenly Colonel Roger Samson felt very much alone. He sank slowly into his desk chair. He was tired and sleepy. The bugle call came loud and clear:

> Day is done;
> Gone the sun
> From the lake,
> From the hill,
> From the sky . . .

"WAKE up, Samson—wake up!"

The colonel opened his eyes. The light was on. But he was dreaming. He was quite certain of it. For there in his study stood Billy Ludlow! Little Billy Ludlow, hands holding an imaginary bugle, lustily singing the words they used to chant to Reveillé:

> The *cap*-tain's worse than the *ser*-geant,
> And the *col*-onel's the *worst* of *all!*

"Billy!" The colonel knew definitely, now, that he was asleep. He had that feeling of knowing it was all a dream, but not wanting to wake up, and he determined in a flash to go on with it. "Little Billy Ludlow!"

"Nobody else!" said Billy Ludlow, advancing with outstretched hand. "How'ya, old lady?"

"Man alive! Man alive!"

"I'm glad you're here," said Billy Ludlow heartily. "It's been a long time since we talked with each other here at Thornleigh."

"Too long a time, Billy. Why didn't you come back before?"

"You did very well without my help," said Ludlow, and smiled. "I couldn't come before. But I'm here now, old boy. Let's go."

"All right, let's go," echoed Roger Samson, and the years seemed to drop from his shoulders as he talked. "Let's look over the academy. Want to?"

"I'd love it," said Billy Ludlow simply.

"The boys are asleep—in bed, anyway." Samson chuckled. "They play the radio after Taps now, Billy. What they call the 'red-hot' bands come on late at night. Twenty demerits if they get stuck by the O. C. Say, remember the time we had the big feed in the corner suite?"

"You bet. Red Nuckols drank a pint of hard cider and insisted on going out to climb up on old Thornleigh's stone horse."

"Not so loud, Billy! And you walked off six hours of penalty tours on the beat when they caught you in Red's room after Taps? Well, let's look at the new Science Building."

Arm in arm, they set out across the parade ground. Samson laughed happily.

"It's certainly great, your coming back, Billy. Why, I thought maybe you were dead. I'll have to show you the lab—maybe work you for a contribution. The old desk in McIlraine Hall, with the initials—and the tree where we used to shinny out of bounds, and all that. Remember?"

"Yes, we shinnied out of bounds. We wouldn't stay here when we could, and then later——"

They walked slowly across the moonlit yard.

"Samson—do you really love the old academy?"

The colonel stopped. "Of course I do," he declared earnestly. "The boys and their problems, the instructors and their families—it's my whole life, Billy. Why, I always did want to run the academy, even when I was a rat here. Why?"

"And you wouldn't like to leave it for anything?"

"Not for anything. Not until I——"

"Well, you *what?*"

"Let's not mention that. It makes me sort of afraid, Billy. I don't want to die."

Billy Ludlow's voice was soft and friendly. "But we all have to some day, Samson."

"Yes—some day. But not——" The colonel stopped talking. Then his words fell over themselves. "Billy! Where have you been? You—you——"

Billy Ludlow put a steadying hand on his arm. "Yes—I went on six years ago. In China. It isn't bad. Steady does it, old boy!"

Colonel Roger Samson tried desperately to wake up. The music from the gymnasium sounded clearly in his ears, but the tune was an old waltz, and it came from a band. He found himself listening eagerly, even as he struggled to shake off the dream of Billy Ludlow's hand on his arm. Might as well dream a little longer. It was pleasant.

"Hear that?" he demanded, managing a grin. "Remember the excitement *that* tune made, over fifty years ago?"

"Yes, old boy—I remember."

Roger Samson listened, and the music soothed his jumping nerves. And then over and above the other instruments sounded a cornet.

"It sounds like Brad Sanders!" said Colonel Roger Samson.

"It *is* Brad Sanders," answered Billy Ludlow.

Roger Samson struggled in earnest then—struggled as a sleeper fights to awaken when an alien noise disturbs his dream—fought desperately at first, then feebly as the parade ground grew brighter with an unearthly light.

"But I'm only in my late sixties!" argued Roger Samson, as if to convince himself that this thing was not possible.

"We have waited a long time," answered Billy Ludlow gently. "Don't you understand? Come with me."

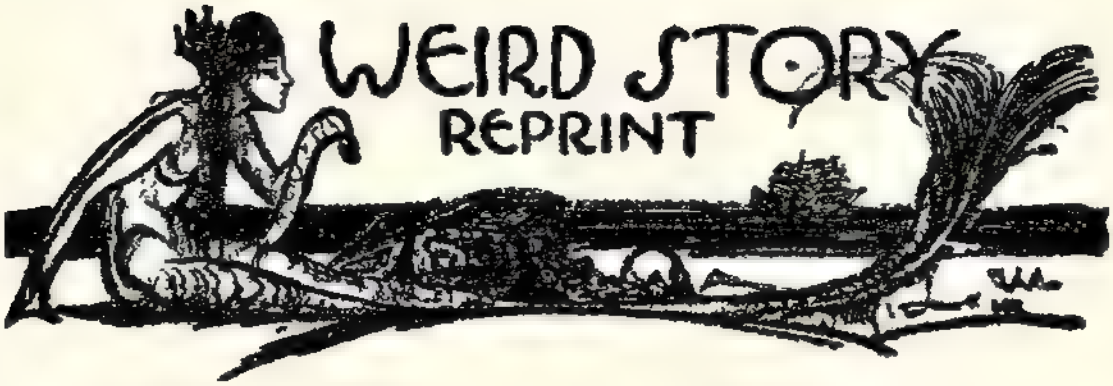
From far, far away, as if from another world, Roger Samson's ear caught the faint sweet call of a bugle sounding the final notes of Taps:

All is well,
Safely rest;
God is nigh . . .

He stood quietly, listening, as the golden thread of music thinned and broke.

"Come," said Billy Ludlow. "They are waiting."

Brad Sanders' cornet swung into the lilting bars of the Reveillé March. Colonel Roger Samson grinned in relief. Billy Ludlow flung an arm across his shoulder. He heard them calling—"Samson the Mighty!" That would be Red Nuckols. Why, he hadn't been called that for years! The past was receding, and somehow the old colonel did not mind. He did not mind at all. For before him a fresh scene was opening clearly—a scene of undreamed-of, indescribable splendor. It was Homecoming Day! And, arm in arm with Billy Ludlow, he went forward. . . .



A Masterpiece of Crime*

By JEAN RICHEPIN

HIS baptismal name was Oscar; his family name, Lapissotte; both commonplace. He was poor, without talent, and he believed himself to be a genius. His first act on entering upon a literary career was to adopt a pseudonym; his second to adopt another. In ten years he managed to employ every sort of *nom de plume* that his active fancy could suggest. All this was done to excite the curiosity of his contemporaries, but this curiosity scarcely ever made the least effort to discover the secrets of his secluded life. Under all these borrowed names, noble and plebeian, romantic and ordinary, he still remained unknown, the poorest and most obscure of literary men.

With patience exhausted, pride humbled, and a life spoiled by vain and futile hopes, there seemed no better way than to end it by a suicide or a crime. Oscar Lapissotte was not brave enough to choose death. Besides, his pretensions to intellectual superiority led him to feel a sort of pleasure in the thought of committing some grand crime. He said to himself that, so far, his genius had taken a false turn, as it had applied itself to dreams of art when it was really destined for the violence of action. And, too, crime would bring him a fortune, and wealth would bring appreciation of those talents which his poverty had served to hide from the sordid world. Artistically and morally, he proved to himself that he must commit a crime. He did commit a crime and for the first time in his life he created a masterpiece.

2

AT ONE time Oscar Lapissotte had lived on the sixth floor of a house in the Rue Saint-Denis. Scarcely noticed among the many other tenants and known only by one of his numerous pseudonyms, he had been the lover of a good-natured, gossiping creature who told him all her small affairs. She was employed by a rich old widow who was an invalid.

One evening, about ten years after this, when leaving one of his friends who was an inmate of a hospital for a time, he chanced, in making his way out, to pass through a ward where he saw a woman

* Translated by H. Twitchell from the French.

whom he at once recognized as his old sweetheart. She was evidently dying. She told him that she had not been with her mistress for three weeks and that her place had been filled. Her mistress was too feeble to visit her and she was very wretched.

"I understand that," said Oscar. "You wish to see her, do you not?"

"Oh! that is not what worries me. It is because I am afraid, if I die here, Madame may read the letters I left at her house and will despise me after I am dead."

"Why should she despise you?"

"Listen, I will tell you the whole truth. You have been my lover; but that was a long time ago and it is all past. I can confide to you the fact that I have had others. You did not care for me long. You are an artist, a man of the world. I was agreeable to you for a time and that was all. But I met at this house a man of my own class in life, a coachman. If Madame had known it, it would have been my ruin. I did so many wicked things for him. I do not want her to know what I have done."

"My dear woman," said Oscar, bruskly, "explain more fully, you speak too fast. You must make everything quite plain if you wish me to aid you."

At this moment, Oscar Lapissotte had no idea of committing a crime. He simply followed the instinct of a man of letters and scented a plot for a story.

"Well," replied the woman, "I will try to explain. I fell suddenly ill with an attack of apoplexy, in the street, and they brought me here where Madame has left me because I was too ill to be moved. I wrote to her and she answered, but sent her servant to see me in her place. But neither to Madame nor to the servant have I spoken of that which torments me. I have a packet of letters from the coachman. In those letters are mentioned certain things: some thefts, which he told me to commit; and then he wrote afterward, thanking me for what I had done. For I stole; yes, I stole for him, stole from my mistress! I ought to have burned the letters, but in them there were always endearing terms and promises of marriage; so I have kept them. One day the scoundrel threatened to take them away from me in order to compromise me. I had refused him money and he made me understand that once master of those papers, he would make me do as he wished. I have been horribly afraid, but still I would not destroy the letters. For greater security I asked Madame for the privilege of placing some important family documents in one of her secretaries. She gave me a desk with a key. I know, of course, that I need only say to her now that I need the papers, but I mistrust the maid who would bring them. From some words which she let fall I suspect that she loves the coachman. He is a cunning fellow, and if he plays the lover to her, it is only to gain possession of the letters whose hiding-place he knows. Now you understand my trouble. Oh, if you would be so good as to help me! I do not deserve it, it is true; but it would be so kind of you to render me this service."

"What service?"

"To bring me those letters."

"But how can I get them?"

"It is all very simple. This evening, about ten o'clock, Madame will take chloral to make her sleep, and she sleeps very soundly after that. The servant is not there at that hour, for she goes away every evening at seven o'clock, after dinner. You may be sure that she has never told the maid that she takes chloral, for fear that she might be robbed. She has told no one but me, in whom she had perfect confidence, poor woman. Well, you can enter then; she will never hear you and you can bring me my letters

when you come away. You know there are two entrances to the house. If you go in by the stairway for the *concierge*, no one will see you. Oh, tell me that you will do this for me!"

"But—the secretary—how can I open it or the door of the apartment?"

"I have two keys to the secretary. I had another one made, to my shame, in order to rob my good mistress. Here it is, with that of my own drawer. Here also is the key of the kitchen door at the top of the *concierge's* stairs. I give them to you. I do not know why, but I have faith in you, and I am sure that you will do this for me, so that I may die in peace."

OSCAR LAPISSOTTE took the keys. His eyes were fixed and staring; a strange pallor swept across his face; his thin and wrinkled cheeks twitched nervously. For suddenly, the possibility of the great crime had appeared to him. This woman dead, the thing was easy enough to execute.

"Oh, I am stifling!" said the sick woman whose long talk had exhausted her. "Give me a drink; give me water!"

The place was only half lighted by the night lamp. All the patients in the surrounding beds were asleep. Oscar raised the head of the dying woman; drew the pillow from under, and placed it over her mouth, where he held it with a grasp of iron for at least ten minutes. He had the frightful courage to count the moments, watch in hand. When he uncovered the face, the woman was dead. She had not made a movement, nor uttered a cry. She seemed to have succumbed at once. He replaced the pillow under her head, straightened the covering under the chin, and the body lay as if sleeping.

The bed was near the door; so the assassin escaped without difficulty. He slipped silently through the corridors and found himself outside without having been seen by anyone.

It was now twenty minutes past nine. Without losing a moment, eager for the execution of his crime, he made his way swiftly toward the Rue Saint-Denis. He entered the house before ten o'clock. On the way he had matured his plans. He went first to the stable, where he thought to find some belongings of the coachman. He took from there a cravat, tore from it a small piece, and put this in his pocket. Then he mounted the stairway. The room was on the first floor and he ran no risk of being seen.

He opened the door noiselessly, found himself in the bedchamber, and with one strong grasp strangled the old woman who slept there so soundly. Again he showed the same *sang-froid*, and did not relax his grip upon the lean old throat for a quarter of an hour.

Then he opened the desk. In the large drawer in the center, there were deeds and notes and other papers. In the left-hand drawer were some bank-notes, in the one at the right some gold coins. He left the deeds and papers, but made a bundle of the bank-notes and gold pieces and thrust them into his pockets. Then he turned his attention to the letters. He found them easily, in the corner, just where the maid had told him.

He burned them in the fireplace, taking care, however, to leave intact those pieces that would most surely compromise the maid and the coachman. A few well-chosen ones sufficed to reveal the whole history of theft. He placed these near the chimney corner, so arranged as to make it appear that the letters had been burned in haste and that the criminal had departed before they were completely consumed.

He placed the piece of cravat, rumpled and torn, in the hands of the dead woman. Then he passed swiftly through the

hall to the street, where he assumed the loitering gait of a *boulevardier*.

Decidedly, Oscar Lapissotte was not mistaken in thinking himself a man of genius: he had the genius for crime and had worked with the hand of a master.

3

A CRIME is not a masterpiece unless the author of it remains unpunished. And the impunity is not really complete, unless justice condemns an innocent person. Oscar Lapissotte had everything perfect and complete. Justice did not hesitate for an instant to find the assassin. He was, without a doubt, the coachman. Were not the fragments of letters infallible proof? Who but the coachman, a lover of the maid, could know so well the circumstances favorable to the commission of such a crime? Who else could have had the keys? Had he not begun by stealing from his mistress, with the connivance of the maid? Was it not quite reasonable to believe that he had finally taken the leap which separates the thief from the murderer? Besides, the piece of cravat was an accuser not to be refuted. And to add to his misfortunes, the coachman had bad antecedents. As a last and overwhelming proof, the man could not tell what he had been doing at that fatal hour. He denied, protested and affirmed his innocence again and again, but all was against him; nothing appeared in his favor.

He was judged, condemned to death and executed. Judges, jury, the lawyers, the newspapers, the public, all agreed that he died justly. There remained only one thing which puzzled them all, and that was that it could not be discovered what he had done with the money. It was believed that the scoundrel had concealed it in some safe place, but no one doubted that he had stolen it. If ever a criminal was proved guilty, it was this one.

4

THEY say that the consciousness of a good action performed gives profound peace. But there are few people who have the courage to admit that a wicked act which escapes punishment also brings its happiness. Barbey d' Aurevilly, in his admirable *Diaboliques*, has not been afraid to write a story entitled *Happiness in Crime*, and he is right; for there are rascals who are happy.

Oscar Lapissotte could enjoy to the utmost the double murder and could taste its fruits in absolute serenity. He experienced neither remorse nor terror. The only feeling he knew was one of immense pride. It was the pride of an artist, which made him forget every moral consideration; it was the perfection of his work, and the consciousness that he had shown himself to be really great, and this furnished him means to slake his ever growing thirst for fame and glory.

He profited by his new fortune and forced his way through the portals of journals and magazines; he was able to feast the critic; but he could not compel the attention of the public. His verse, his prose, his dramas, all failed to possess any power of pleasing the people. Literary men knew a little of Anatole Desroses, the man of letters who had more money than talent; but all were agreed in denying him the least spark of real talent, or genius. He was daily convinced of his own inability and mediocrity.

"And yet," he said to himself sometimes with a brightening of the eye, "and yet, if I wished! If I should tell them of my masterpiece! For I have created a masterpiece! It may be that Anatole Desroses is a fool, but Oscar Lapissotte is a man of genius. It is a pity that a deed

so well planned, so powerfully conceived, so vigorously executed, so completely successful, should remain unknown. Oh, that day I had the true, the real inspiration which leads to perfection. Abbé Prévost has scribbled a hundred romances, but only one *Manon Lescaut*. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre left only *Paul and Virginia*. There are many geniuses who produce only one great work. But indeed, what a work! That remains like a monument in literature. And I am of that family of geniuses. I have produced but one good thing. Why have I lived it instead of writing it? If I had written it I should be famous. I should have not only a story to show, but all the world would read it, for it would be unique of its kind. I have produced a masterpiece of crime."

This idea became at length a mania with him. For years he cherished it. He let it consume him; at first the regret that he had not had the dream instead of the act, then the desire to relate the fact as a dream. What haunted him was not the demon of perversity, the singular power which urges men of the Edgar Allan Poe type to cry their secret aloud; it was the need of fame, the desire for glory. His fixed idea pursued him with a thousand specious reasonings.

"Why should you not write the truth? What do you fear? Anatole Desroses is safe from justice. The crime is old. It is forgotten by all the world. The author of it is known, he is dead and buried. You will have the reputation of having artistically arranged an old law case. You will reveal in it all the obscure thoughts, all the rancorous hatreds that have urged the murderer to the commission of the crime; all the faculties employed to commit it; all the circumstances that the marvelous inventor we call chance has furnished you. You are alone in the secret of the deed and no one will guess that you are the real author of it. They will see in the story only the effort of an extraordinary imagination. And then you will be the man you wish to be: the great author who reveals himself late, but with a masterstroke. You will enjoy your crime as never criminal enjoyed one before. You will have gained by it not only fortune, but fame also. And who knows? After this first success, when you have a name, the public will read again your other works, and will see without a doubt what an unjust opinion they have had of you. On the road to fame, it is only the first step which costs. Recall a little of that courage that you had one particular day in your life. See how well it succeeded. It cannot fail to succeed now. You have known once how to seize opportunity by the forelock. Do so again. Shall you allow yourself to shrink from it? You know well that the deed was grand, do you not? Well, then, tell it without fear, without hesitation, proudly, in all its majestic honor. Be boldly courageous, renounce the pseudonym and sign your own name. It is not Jacques de la Mole, Antoine Guirland, nor even Anatole Desroses. It is not the host of men without talent that you wish to render illustrious; it is yourself, it is Oscar Lapissotte!"

So one evening Oscar Lapissotte seated himself before a pile of white paper, his head on fire, his hand burning, like a great poet who feels himself about to create some grand work, and he wrote the true history of his crime. He told of the miserable struggles of Oscar Lapissotte, his Bohemian life, his multiplied failures, his proud mediocrity, his rancorous hatreds, the ever haunting thoughts of suicide and crime, the revolt of a heart that fancy had deceived and that wished to avenge itself on the reality, the whole a romance in metaphysics. Then in a sober fashion and with frightful clearness, he

described the scene at the hospital, the scene in the Rue Saint-Denis, the death of the innocent coachman, the triumph of the real murderer. With a subtlety of details curious and almost satanic, he analyzed the causes which had decided the author to publish his crime, and he finished by the apotheosis of Oscar Lapissotte who put his signature at the end of this confession.

5

THE *Masterpiece of Crime* appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and had prodigious success. One can gain some idea of it by reading a few of the following extracts from some of the articles which greeted its appearance: "Everyone knows that the *nom de plume* of Oscar Lapissotte conceals an author who delights in this sort of disguise, Monsieur Anatole Desroses. After having, for a long time, wasted his talents in light journalistic work, Monsieur Anatole Desroses has just given us his true measure. The story is drawn from a judicial tragedy which occurred about ten years ago in the Rue Saint-Denis. But the imagination of the romancer has known how to transform a vulgar assassination into a wonderfully complex and interesting story. Poor Gaboriau himself would not have thought of the strange complications that Monsieur Anatole Desroses has invented. We shall give part of the *Masterpiece of Crime* in our next Sunday's issue." *(Figaro.)*

"Masterpiece, indeed, this *Masterpiece of Crime!* This pen has the sharpness of a sword and the keenness of a scalpel. It spares nothing, it lays bare the darkest thoughts of the mind, the inmost feelings of the soul. One sees here clearly, too clearly indeed, all, everything. It is a sulfurous clearness accorded to the eye of the evil one himself; it is the finger of the evil one, this finger of Monsieur Anatole Desroses, which drags away the covering of crime and shows the human heart in all its nakedness. He pleases, this Monsieur Anatole Desroses, like a vice, a forbidden pleasure." *(Constitutionelle.)*

In short, there was a concert of plaudits, some generous, some envious, some foolish, from the Prudhommes and other lights of journalism.

6

YET in all these articles, in the most flattering even, two things were always found which irritated Oscar Lapissotte. The first was that they persisted in taking his true name for a *nom de plume* and in calling him Anatole Desroses. The second was the fact that they spoke too much of his imagination and seemed wholly incredulous as to the probability of his story being a true one. These two desiderata tormented him to such a degree that he forgot in them all the happiness of his budding glory. Artists are made thus, so that even when the public and the critics lull them to slumber on a bed of roses, they suffer if one leaf is crumpled.

So, one day, when someone congratulated the great author who had written the *Masterpiece of Crime,* and highly flattered him, the great author answered, stepping quite close to him:

"Oh, Monsieur, you would felicitate me in quite another strain if you knew the real truth of the affair. My novel is not a romance; it really has happened. The crime has been committed just as I have related it. And it is I who committed it. I called myself by my true name, Oscar Lapissotte."

He said this quite coldly, with a grand air of conviction, speaking every word

(Please turn to page 374)

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE janitor joined us, and we went slowly up the five flights of steps. At last we came to the door of Room 500. Asham and Dean, the last to leave, had apparently turned off the lights, for all was dark. But the door was unlocked, and for a moment I fancied I heard a stealthy movement within. Then I opened the door and turned on the lights.

For a minute I noticed nothing; then, abruptly, I stopped dead in my path across the room to my table, feeling the blood rush from my face.

"Stan! Mr. Brown!" I called, without moving.

The two came running into the room.

"My God!" cried Elson.

The janitor stood speechless, his mouth open.

There before us were four cadavers, propped into peculiarly life-like positions, stiff and rigid, their opened eyes staring glassily before them. One of them was seated, his dead fingers gripped tightly on the arm of the chair. Another leaned against the wall, his knees bent, as if he would fall in another moment. Yet he did not fall. The other two were perhaps the most horrible. They sat on the edge of a table, side by side, as students sit when resting from their work; but on the faces of these dead things were utterly shocking expressions—expressions not at all like those of people long dead, long preserved, but rather like those of people newly dead. Their lips were lifted above their teeth in frightful, unspeakably horrible leers. . . .

You will want to read this weird and uncanny tale of the dissecting laboratory of a medical school and the eery horror that took place there; a goose-flesh story about corpses that would not stay dead. It will be published complete in the April issue of WEIRD TALES:

They Shall Rise

By August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer

—Also—

THE DRUIDIC ROOM

By ROBERT BLOCH

Two dreadful hands reached out hideously from the yawning pit beneath the Druid stone—a gripping tale of a grisly horror that took the lives of three men.

SON OF SATAN

By ARLTON EADIE

A weird story of Venice in carnival time, and the infatuation of a lovely high-born maid for her golem lover.

THE RULER OF FATE

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A thrilling, fascinating, thought-provoking tale of romance and a weird creature that rules our Earth from a cavern of horror on the Moon.

THE FACE IN THE WIND

By CARL JACOBI

An eery story of a strange frog wall, and the beautiful but evil face — a woman's face — that appeared in the storm one night.

April Weird Tales . . . . . Out April 1

A Masterpiece of Crime

(Continued from page 372)

slowly and distinctly as if he wished to be believed.

"Ah, charming, charming!" exclaimed the flatterer. "The pleasantry is rather lugubrious, however. It is like the best of Baudelaire."

The following day all the journals repeated the anecdote. They found it delicious, this attempt at mystification by which Anatole Desroses wished to make himself pass for an assassin. Decidedly he was original and quite worthy of living in Paris.

Oscar Lapissotte became furious. In making this confession, he had acted, to a degree, mechanically. But now he really wished to be believed by someone. He repeated his confession to all his friends whom he met on the boulevard. The first day it seemed rather droll. The second day his friends found it monotonous. The third day he was thought decidedly tiresome. At the end of the week he was frankly adjudged an imbecile. He was unable to live up to the reputation of a great author, everyone said. His warmest partizans began to torment him by telling him strange and incredible stories. This descent from the heights of fame exasperated him.

"Oh, it is too much!" he said. "No one will give credence to that which is the exact truth; no one will believe that I have not only written, but executed, a *Masterpiece of Crime!* Well, I shall have a clear conscience in the matter. Tomorrow, all Paris shall know who Oscar Lapissotte is!"

7

He sought out the judge who had presided when the case from the Rue Saint-Denis was tried.

"Monsieur," said he, "I have come to give myself into custody. I am Oscar Lapissotte."

"It is unnecessary to continue, Monsieur," replied the judge. "I have read your novel, and I extend you my congratulations. I know also the eccentricity with which you have amused yourself for the past week. Another than myself might perhaps be annoyed that you should carry your pleasantry to this extreme. But I love the fine arts and all literary productions, and I shall pardon your sprightly farce since it gives me the pleasure of knowing you."

"But, Monsieur," said Oscar, impatient under these polite phrases, "it is no farce! I swear to you that I am Oscar Lapissotte; that I have committed this crime and that I am going to prove it to you."

"Well, Monsieur," replied the judge, "you will see how accommodating I am. For the curiosity of the thing I am going to lend myself to this farce. I confess to you that I enjoy in advance the pleasure of seeing how a mind as subtle as your own can adapt itself to the task of proving to me this absurdity."

"The absurdity! But what I related is the absolute truth. The coachman was not guilty. It is I who have——"

"I believe you have said all that, Monsieur, in your novel which I have read. But, if it pleases you to tell it to me yourself, I shall take great pleasure in listening to your story, though it will prove nothing at all, except that which is already proved: that you have an imagination singularly rich and strange."

"I have had only imagination enough to commit this crime."

"Not to commit it, but to write it, dear sir, to write it. Stop one moment and let me tell you my opinion of it. You have had almost too much imagination; you

have passed the limits permitted to the fancy of the author; you have invented certain circumstances that are not to be considered as possible, or probable, at least."

"But when I tell you——"

"Allow me; I beg your pardon, but you must admit that I possess some judgment in criminal matters. Well, I assure you that the circumstances of your crime are not naturally arranged. The meeting with the maid in the hospital is too unlikely, and then there are other improbabilities. As a work of art, your novel is charming, original, well planned, what you call strong; and I admit that you are perfectly right, you authors, to travesty reality in this way. But your famous crime in itself is impossible. My dear Monsieur Desroses, I am sorry to give you the least annoyance; but if I admire you as a man of letters, I cannot accept you seriously as a criminal."

"It is that which you must do now," shouted Oscar Lapissotte, rushing upon the magistrate.

He was frothing at the lips, his eyes were bloodshot, his whole body was bursting with rage. He would have strangled the judge had not his cries brought help. The judge's assistants overcame the furious man, and bound him.

Five days later he was taken to Charenton as a hopeless maniac.

"See to what literary ambition may lead!" said the newspapers the following day. "Anatole Desroses has produced, just once, a great work. He has been so wrought up by it that he has ended by believing that his dream was reality. It is the old fable of Pygmalion and his statue."

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936
....	....	....	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
....	....	....	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
....	Mar.	....	....	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	....
....	....	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	....
....	....	....	....	May	May	May	....
....	....	....	June	June	June	June	....
....	....	Jun.-Jul.	July	July	July	July	....
Aug.	....	....	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	....
....	....	....	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	....
....	....	....	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	....
Nov.	....	....	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	....
Dec.	....	....	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	....

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

840 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Illinois

8

THE most frightful part of it all was that Oscar Lapissotte was not a madman. He had all his reason and was only the more tortured by it.

"Now all misfortunes are mine," he said. "They will believe neither in my name nor in my crime. When I am dead I shall pass simply for Anatole Desroses, a scribbler who had the genius to create only one fine work; and they will know as a fictitious personage this Oscar Lapissotte, this being that I am, the man of action, decision, the hero of ferocity, the living negation of remorse. Oh, let them guillotine me but let them know the truth! Were it for one moment only, before thrusting my neck under the ax; were it for one second even while the knife fell; were it only for the length of a flash of lightning, that I might have the certainty of my glory and the vision of my immortality!"

These exaltations were treated with cold water. At last, by living with one fixed idea and in the company of madmen, he actually became mad. And when he had reached this point he was discharged as cured!

Oscar Lapissotte finished by believing that he was really Anatole Desroses, and that he had never been an assassin. He died with the conviction that he had dreamed his crime and not committed it!

JULIUS HOPKINS, who lives at 4522 15th Street, N. W., in Washington, D. C., in a letter to the Eyrie makes what seems to us a very excellent suggestion. We are eager to know how the suggestion appeals to you, the other readers of WEIRD TALES. Let us know what you think of his plan. If your reaction to it is favorable, we can promise 100 percent co-operation on our part to make the plan effective. Mr. Hopkins, who has been a loyal friend of this magazine for years, has evidently given much careful thought to his plan. To get it before you, we print Mr. Hopkins' letter in full:

"For the past three years I have been waiting anxiously for someone to make a suggestion that we bring together the readers of WEIRD TALES magazine in the different cities, but, alas! not one would step forward to make the move. I have put a great deal of thought to the idea and am thoroughly convinced that it would prove highly successful. I know that in D. C. alone there are a great many people who read WT devotedly and who would be intensely interested in getting together once a month for a discussion of the magazine.

"I have a nearly complete file of WT—only needing some '23's and '24's to complete it—so I looked through the Eyrie and wrote down the names of those who have written from D. C. I looked up those names in the city directory and found the addresses of a few of them. I have visited some of

these people and all of them are very much in favor of my plan. Among these persons I discovered a former favorite WT author, Everil Worrell, who wrote *Leonora, The Canal*, which was reprinted in the April 1935 issue, and other splendid stories. She is intensely interested in my endeavor and will do all she can to help me in Washington.

"I suggest the following ideas for this contemplated organization:

"I. Name: The WT Club.

"II. Purpose:
1. Furtherance of interest in WT.
2. To make the broadcasting of WT stories possible.
3. To get Hollywood to produce weird movies of WT stories.
4. To produce plays based on WT stories.

"III. Activities:
1. General discussion of the stories in WT.
2. Discussion of particular points in WT stories.
3. Criticism and discussion of stories written by members, who think they can write good weird ones. The best of these manuscripts are to be submitted to the editor of WT for consideration.
4. Narratives by members of true weird incidents.
5. Clipping collections of true weird incidents written in newspapers and magazines; items collected to be discussed.

"IV. Constitution:
1. Members must be WT subscribers or obtain it regularly from news stands.
2. Meetings will be held once a month.
3. Age limit: 18 and over.
4. Election of officers:
   a. President, who shall preside over all meetings.
   b. Secretary, who shall record the minutes of each meeting.

"In forming a club the main object is to

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get the people together. This is where you, Mr. Wright, can give a great deal of help. In each city someone will have to volunteer to start the club. In Chicago, perhaps our good friend Jack Darrow will start things rolling; in New York, perhaps Allen Glasser; in Hollywood, perhaps Forrest J. Ackerman, etc. If they are as loyal to WT as they seem to be, they will be only too glad to do this work. You can make requests for volunteers in the Eyrie.

"When we have found our volunteers, you can have a list of names and addresses of subscribers in the respective cities compiled and sent to them. This will form the nucleus of our organization. Our volunteers will, of course, get in touch with these people and talk things over. You can also print the names and addresses of the volunteer organizers in the Eyrie and request anyone, who reads the magazine, to get in touch with the organizer in his city. We can have notices printed in the newspapers and that will contact many others.

"O. K., Mr. Wright, the stage is set; so let's start the show!

"I volunteer for Washington, D. C.; so please send me the names and addresses of WT subscribers here so I can get the WT Club, D. C. branch, started. I want to have our first meeting soon."

Quinn Has the Knack

Peggy Bauer, of Brooklyn, writes: "*A Rival from the Grave,* Seabury Quinn's latest macabre thriller, is of course the outstanding one in January's perfectly swell issue. Mr. Quinn's knack of drawing such strange pictures in a few well-written sentences and Jules de Grandin's Gallic wisdom and humor make an absorbing story. And then of course, Jirel of Joiry is a favorite character of mine, and so *The Dark Land* is next best on the list. There again is a story filled with the most fascinating and vivid scenes, which leave one in a dreamy state of mind. But I really have a bone to pick with Jirel—I think Pav would have made a perfect mate for her. So although slightly disappointed at the ending, I can see that Jirel is still free to follow her marvelous wanderings. The Doctor Satan stories, although interesting, I disapprove of heartily on the grounds that they are not the real 'McCoy.' They are only 'half weird' and do not merit a place in your magazine. Most decidedly, Conan gets a vote from me—as he would from any right-minded woman. He is 'tops'! As a suggestion: why not have Jirel of Joiry and Conan get together? They are the two most powerful characters in your magazine—and would that be a story!"

Brickbats and Bouquets

Michael Liene, of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, writes: "And so we start the New Year, '36, with the January issue of WEIRD TALES! Artist Brundage's cover design is beautifully done, even though her exquisite damozels are slightly out of proportion. I have noticed that Mrs. Brundage has a tendency to make her own rules regarding a nude's lovely limbs. Mr. Quinn's story has no incident that contains an inspiration for a *weird* cover design; so why didn't Artist Brundage try an illustration from Moore's *The Dark Land?* For—I think—a very good example: a weird pastel of only Jirel of Joiry's lovely head and hands, as she is gowned in black velvet and blends with the dark background—and the gruesome, dull white creature she meets, standing before her. With lovely pastel colors, and lights and shadows, it certainly would have made a *weird* cover. And the readers want such covers. This month's nudes, though very beautiful, certainly weren't *weird!* . . . In the December issue of WEIRD TALES, there were several drawings by Virgil Finlay. I can only state that they were the most perfect and exquisite illustrations that I have ever come across. I was disappointed in not finding any of his work in the January issue. When will we have more of his work? And what about Hugh Rankin?—his drawings are certainly weird. Seabury Quinn's *A Rival from the Grave* was quite interesting. Though I really never work myself into a nervous collapse over his stories, nevertheless, he is my favorite author. He always manages to make his tales hold the reader's interest. And that is a good author's work. However, as I once stated before, by now, Harrisonville (where Mr. Quinn's characters work out his plots) must be simply deserted, because that little Frenchman, de Grandin, has been killing the terrible fiends there, who seem to get the biggest kick in coming from very distant lands to settle in that little New Jersey city. And just think of all the respectable people these fiends have also wantonly murdered; sometimes coming back even from the very dead,

to do their dastardly deeds! Or—is Harrisonville so very much over-populated, that one is only too glad for one's friends to be 'finished off'? You might whisper into Mr. Quinn's attentive ear that there are many other places besides his fictitious Harrisonville! August W. Derleth's *The Satin Mask* is an original short story, well worth its reading. All of Mr. Derleth's works, though never sensational successes, are always top-notch. It may be because he tells them in plain, simple, everyday English—that is, somehow, very refreshing—like a breath of modest wood violets, after the heady fragrance of some exotic tropical bloom. His story gets my second vote. Paul Ernst's Doctor Satan stories are perfectly ridiculous; the old-school type of 'weird-thriller'—with archfiend and super-super detective trying to triumph over each other; beautiful secretary in background, being on hand in case archfiend would like to kidnap her so that super-super detective will go berserk at thoughts of the girl-he-suddenly-realizes-he-loves, in clutches of the fiend, and rush to her rescue—and thus finish off villain and story! . . . Robert E. Howard's *Hour of the Dragon* is vividly written, as are all Mr. Howard's stories. Conan is at his bloodthirsty worst, killing off his enemies left and right; lovely damozels walk about in scanty shifts and pine to be held in his muscular arms—so what more could one want, I ask of you? Methinks the climax is certainly going to be a humdinger. *The Dark Land*, by C. L. Moore, gets my vote for first place. . . . For originality of ideas in fantastic realms, Moore takes first place. However, can C. L. Moore discover something else instead of the hero's (or heroine's, as the case may be) tremendous will-power, to beat the foe? The short short stories are fitting tidbits. Rosenquest's *Return to Death* strikes a gruesome note of pity for the unfortunate Feldenpflanz. . . . Here's to a splendid and successful New Year's—to you, the Editor, the staff, WEIRD TALES, and its authors! May you long continue!"

Pretty Ladies on the Covers

Diamond Bencke, of Garden City, Kansas, writes: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for ten years, and think it is a great magazine. This is my second letter to the Eyrie, in this time. But I must break my silence to let you know how much I enjoy the stories

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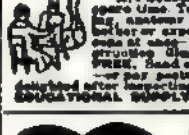

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written by Robert E. Howard and C. L. Moore; they are my favorite writers in WEIRD TALES. *The Hour of the Dragon* by Howard, followed by *The Dark Land* by Moore, gets my vote for January. I am glad to see that you still keep your pretty ladies on the cover; by all means continue to do so, and never let the prudes influence you otherwise. And keep WEIRD TALES weird. Now I hate to kick about our magazine, but I want you to know that I am opposed to the Doctor Satan stories; why keep them up in every issue? I feel cheated when these stories appear, and I always read them last. They are detective stories and take up much valuable space. A page or so devoted to authors is all right, as some of the readers want it. If it is an extra page, fine and dandy, but never cut out a brief story or shorten the Eyrie on account of it. I enjoy the Eyrie greatly; how they do squabble and carry on, sometimes!"

Pest? Far From It!

David Mahoney, of San Francisco, writes: "The three best stories in your January issue are in my mind the following: 1. *Dagon* (reprint); 2. *A Rival from the Grave;* and 3. part two of *The Hour of the Dragon.* Now I am going to ask you something which I hope you will please answer in the near future. About a year or so ago a few readers wrote in to the Eyrie asking you if you would put out a quarterly issue bigger than the monthly issue, but containing some of the earliest 'classics' of Lovecraft, Quinn, Howard, Kline, etc. You answered that you figured on doing just that, but so far I haven't seen anything more about it. I really think they would surely sell fast, because many of the newer and older readers would like to read some of your earliest hits, which it is impossible to procure in back issues. Now for a few reprint nominations: *The Outsider* by Lovecraft; *The Horror on the Links* by Quinn; *The Eighth Green Man* by Pendarves; one of Nictzin Dyalhis's early hits. Hoping I haven't been a pest, I remain one of your faithful WEIRD TALES readers."

Virgil Finlay's Drawings

A reader in New York City, who signs himself C. B. H., writes: "If our dear Mr. ('No Like') Slomich is going to start this 'war against Brundage covers' again, I think I'll take a few dozen aspirins. And just when I thought it was going to be all quiet on the Eyrie front. A good bet would be to add one of Miss Gertrude Hemken's letters each month in the Eyrie. That lady sure knows how to write an enjoyable and interesting letter. Mrs. Brundage sure can make the bad girls on her covers look mean and evil. For instance, *The Queen of the Lilin,* the usurper in *A Witch Shall Be Born, The Avenger from Atlantis,* the brunette in *The Slithering Shadow,* and most of all, the *Rival from the Grave.* Please don't put any other artist's works on the covers as some people have suggested. C. L. Moore is quite a promising artist. But the greatest surprize of all was seeing the three masterpieces of your new artist, Virgil Finlay. I'm *not* glad to see that he hasn't any in the January issue. Outside of this you started the New Year right. The Jules de Grandin story was as good as all of Quinn's stories are. Doctor Satan was thrilling as usual, too. I was happy to see my favorite, Jirel, at last. More of the warrior maid, please. The shorts and poems were excellent. I haven't started the Conan serial yet, but I think it will be fine. I have counted and found that the fine author, H. P. Lovecraft, has only had 3½ stories in the last two years. That to me seems like a horrible crime. Continue to put out the fine issues like those you have put out in the past." [Speaking of Mr. Finlay's drawings: how do you like the two in this issue, illustrating the stories by Hamilton and Smith? You should see the twenty-five exquisite illustrations by him in the Wright's Shakespeare Library edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*—THE EDITOR.]

Lovecraft's Literary Art

Henry Kuttner, of Beverly Hills, California, writes: "Just got the January issue, and was especially delighted with two of the stories in it—C. L. Moore's excellent bit of weird craftsmanship, *The Dark Land,* and Robert Johnson's brief little gem, *They,* which succeeded in capturing the same eery suggestion of stark horror at which Lovecraft excels. I'm trying to figure out whether the ending was weak or a piece of damn good technique! And, of course, *Dagon,* by Lovecraft, with its extraordinary paragraph describing the undersea horror darting to the monolith, 'about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms.' That one paragraph has an effect of weirdness comparable to the flight of

the terrified whippoorwills at the death of the monster-man in *The Dunwich Horror*, and the demoniac celebration beneath the church in *The Horror at Red Hook*. How about reprinting HP's *The Moon-Bog*, and his other tale about a derelict U-boat that reached sunken Atlantis? And a word for *Return to Death* by J. Wesley Rosenquest, that clever, ironic little tale. Excellently done!"

From a French Reader

Jacques Bergier, of Paris, France, writes: "As one of your numerous European readers, I compliment you on having the finest fantastic magazine I have ever read. You have published some of the best stories of this kind, such as: *Through the Gates of the Silver Key* by Price and Lovecraft, *Dust of Gods* and other stories by Moore, *The Gorgon* by Smith, *The Night Wire* by Arnold, and many others. I wish to thank you for many hours of entertainment, and also to make some suggestions. By all means, give us more stories by H. P. Lovecraft. He is the only writer of today who is really *haunted*. Some of his stories, such as *Pickman's Model* and *The Rats in the Walls*, surpass even Poe, Blackwood and Machen."

From the Dark Continent

D. de Woronin, of Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, writes: "This is the annual consignment of brickbats and roses from the Dweller in the Dark (Continent). Looking through WT for the past year or so, my committee of witch-doctors unanimously decided that the year was marked by an exceptionally fine lot of serials, with *Satan in Exile*—a veritable epic of the Void—at the top of the list. Conan the Cimmerian still leads the field of characters, but only just; for Northwest Smith, followed closely by Jirel of Joiry, is immediately behind him. Doctor Satan (and enemies), having started somewhere round the back, is swiftly forging through the field. But where is Ti Fong? He began so well—in fact, nearly jumped into the lead—then just disappeared. 'Tisn't fair—tell Bassett Morgan not to be so lazy. Lovecraft and Merritt had better be very careful, for C. L. Moore has become a very formidable rival of theirs in the field of fantasy unlimited. Now that Hamilton has given up moving galaxies and the very cosmos in his off-hand manner, he has turned

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out a couple of classics recently: *The Six Sleepers* and *The Avenger from Atlantis.* Talking of the Lost Continent, *Once in a Thousand Years* was a marvelous tale — it made me wonder even more about things. I seem to remember a few brickbats on account of *The Judge's House.* Why so? I thought it was a grand reprint. For the best short short I think I'd pick on *The Idol and the Rajah*—another case of mythology coming to light suddenly, like the unforgettable *Shambleau.* You found a find in Robert Bloch. To those that dislike his verbosity: what about the inimitable Clark Ashton Smith? Or are those grousers too lazy to use their dictionaries and, incidentally, increase their own vocabulary? . . . I'm glad you had the nudes off the mag for a while—the yells for their return certainly drowned the squeaks that had been raised against them some time ago. There is no doubt now that an overwhelming majority of us wants them, and I do believe they have come to stay—you are very subtle, Mr. Editor! And don't you part with Jack Binder and Napoli—they are by far the best and most artistic illustrators you ever had."

Seabury Quinn's Latest Yarn

Willis Conover, Jr., of Kenmore, New York, writes: "Although I have read but half the stories in the January issue I believe it is absolutely safe to state that *A Rival from the Grave* is the finest tale in the issue. Mr. Quinn's latest is his best to date. The story emanated vibrations of originality! Despite the fact that it was a vampire tale (old reliable), the idea was presented in a most novel fashion, namely, self-manufactured body from psychoplasm, a totally new compound. Only Seabury Quinn could originate *that* idea! Also, never before have I heard occultism expressed as a science. Why not have Quinn write a sequel to the story? Or perhaps I should say a rewrite, only told from Elaine's point of view. As yet I have not read any tale that a vampire is supposed to be relating. What do the readers think? Such a story would present certain obvious difficulties, but Quinn could surely overcome them. *Horror Insured* was the best of the Doctor Satan series. If I were weak-minded enough to half believe the stories in WEIRD TALES, I fear that, after reading *Horror Insured,* I'd go nuts if my body's temperature went up four or five degrees. Can't C. L. Moore write anything but woman-witch-half-breed stories? *Shambleau, The Dark Land, Yvala,* ye gods! One could see that WEIRD TALES is weird merely by glancing over the contents page. Witness a few of the words taken from same: bizarre, unusual, weird, grave, creeping horror, deadly, eery, strange, eldritch, gruesome, ghosts, vampire, dreadful, dead, and death—whew! That's enough to make even a WEIRD TALES fan jump out of his skin."

Perfect

Johnny MacDonald, of Martinsburg, West Virginia, writes: "C. L. Moore's *The Dark Land* again convinces me that he is the very best of your authors. Who but Moore could conceive such wonders of eery intrigue as *Shambleau, Black Thirst,* or *The Black God's Kiss?* Who could create such strange characters as Northwest Smith, Jirel of Joiry; such horrors as the Alendar, Shambleau? In my mind Edgar Allan Poe's greatest tale is *Ligeia,* yet Moore passes Poe by three lengths in a number of his magnificent stories. That makes Moore some type of genius, doesn't it? Among others, I admire Lovecraft's pure, cosmic horror and Owen's exquisite fantasy. Smith's eldritch tales of wizardry, Howard's weird adventure tales, and Donald Wandrei's dreamy strangeness are among my other preferences. As for your cover illustrator, Brundage, she is the best ever."

A Truly Unusual Tale

Donald V. Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I was glad to note that the story, *The Way Home* by Stern, won first place in the November number of WT. Every so often one runs across a truly unusual tale in your pages—one that grips the reader and holds him in its spell by its sheer originality or by the striking character of its style. Such a story was *The Way Home*—a story to be treasured and reread. The basic idea of the story is not new, but the author's treatment is marvelously original. Keep printing these scattered 'excellent-plus' stories. The cover of the December issue was not so good. The January one was better, but I didn't like the subject portrayed. Finlay is an excellent artist. He wasn't used at all in January — to my disappointment. Let's have more of his fine work. . . . The best December story was *The Hour of the Dragon,* which bids fair to become a really

great novel—the best Conan story yet. *The Great Brain of Kaldar* was next and then *The Chain of Aforgomon* — a better-than-average Smith story. *The Man With the Blue Beard* was not really weird—though a good yarn. *The Hedge* was a clever little item and the reprint was excellent. I was hugely disappointed in *The Carnival of Death*. It fell far below the standard set by *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*. I'm in doubt as to whether it belonged in WEIRD TALES at all. Ernst is better when he leaves Doctor Satan alone. Though *Horror Insured* is better than some and is quite weird, I agree with Jack Darrow in calling all the series 'formula stories.' If you must print them, please give us one only about every three months or so. *A Rival from the Grave* gets first place in January. It's good to see de Grandin again. He's appearing too seldom these days. Conan presses close behind and takes second. I would place *The Dark Land* in third place. It is another beautiful and imaginative word picture — exemplifying once more the uncanny genius of C. L. Moore. But I prefer Northwest Smith and eagerly await his appearance in the next issue. *The Satin Mask* and *Return to Death* are excellent little stories. The other two ultra-shorts are good, but I didn't care much for *Dagon*. The line-up for February surely looks good. I fail to see how you can keep improving so."

Brief Briefs

E. McCrary, of Fresno, California, writes: "You have printed a few poems that I could take to heart and remember. One such stands out—I remember now a couplet from it:

> " 'There we might for ever dwell,
> Deathless and impossible.'

"This was printed four or five years ago. It was as good as Poe."

Constance Gill, of Saint John's, New Brunswick, writes: "A few months ago you printed a superb story called *The Six Sleepers*. I think it would make an excellent serial if the characters went on with their adventuring in the new world."

Ed S. Woodhead, of Titusville, Florida, writes: "I was disappointed not to find any pictures by Virgil Finlay in your January issue. He is the best artist you have ever had. I was glad to read *Lukundoo* again. It was one of my favorites when it first appeared—kept me awake."

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B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "Your best story for 1935 was *Once in a Thousand Years*, by Frances Bragg Middleton. Let's hope we see more of her splendid work. Also Hazel Heald, who gave us *Out of the Eons*."

Dwight A. Boyce, of Ludlow, Massachusetts, writes: "Napoli's illustration for *The Hour of the Dragon* was up to his usual standard of perfection, and the Virgil Finlay drawings were marvelous. I have never seen anything half so good in any other pulp magazine. His work is very much in character in the magazine, and is a worthy complement to the high standard of fiction generally maintained by WEIRD TALES."

Seabury Quinn writes from his home in Brooklyn: "Three cheers and a couple of hoorays! The January 1936 WT surely tops 'em all. It is the best issue you have handed the clamoring mob of readers for many and many a long year. . . . Altogether, the January issue is a decidedly hot number, and I'm thinking you'll get some mighty favorable responses on it."

A Tip-top Issue

Charles H. Deems, of Hill Top, Arkansas, writes: "WEIRD TALES started off the new year with a tip-top issue. The Doctor Satan story, *Horror Insured*, was a really weird story, in fact, the weirdest yet in that series. The unusual Jules de Grandin tale is my first choice as the best in the January number. It was really weird and exuded a ghostly atmosphere. . . . Robert E. Howard's new serial about Conan is certainly exciting and bizarre. Particularly commendable is the author's description of the battle between Conan's army and Tarascus' host in the first installment of *The Hour of the Dragon*. It was a vivid portrayal of a medieval battle, very realistically described, y' know. WEIRD TALES has improved beyond all improvement."

Doctor Lamontaine

T. C. Marks, of Jackson, Tennessee, writes: "Lamontaine in Ward's *The Man With the Blue Beard* is certainly worthy of further mention. Ward has created a character he should keep alive in WT. The story was excellent. Quinn's de Grandin, Howard's Conan, and Ward's Lamontaine for a steady literary diet, and your magazine would be perfect."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, which stories do you like best in this issue? Write us a letter about your likes and dislikes, or fill out the vote coupon on this page and send it to the Eyrie, care of WEIRD TALES. The most popular story in the January issue, as shown by your letters and votes, was *A Rival from the Grave*, by Seabury Quinn. This was pressed for first place by C. L. Moore's eery story, *The Dark Land*, and by the second installment of *The Hour of the Dragon*, by Robert E. Howard.

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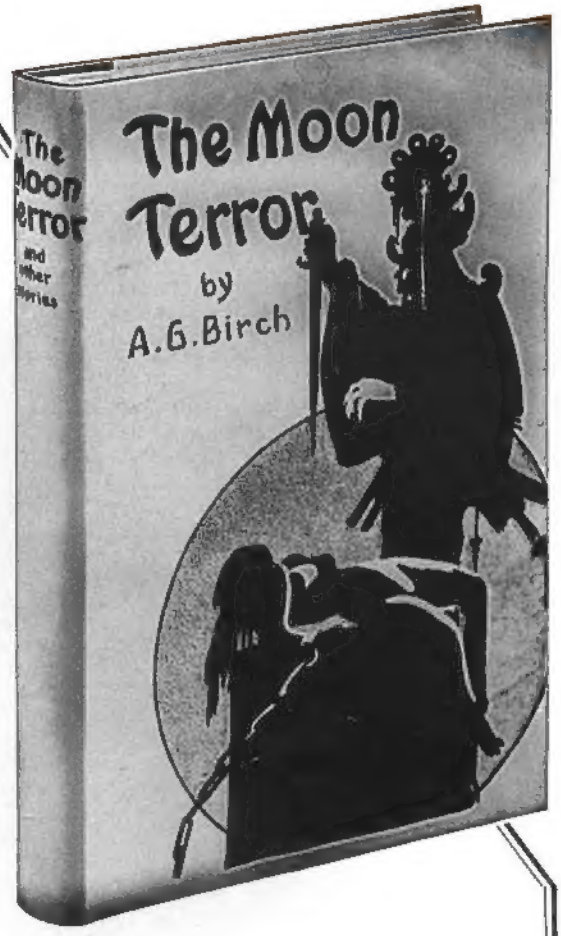

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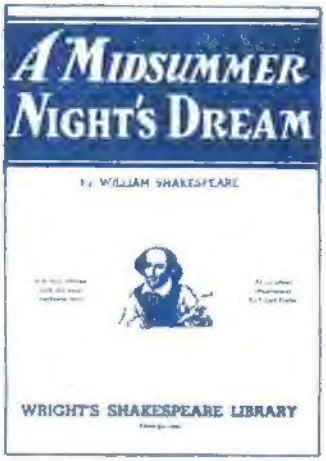

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